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Suzanne
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ART

Paul
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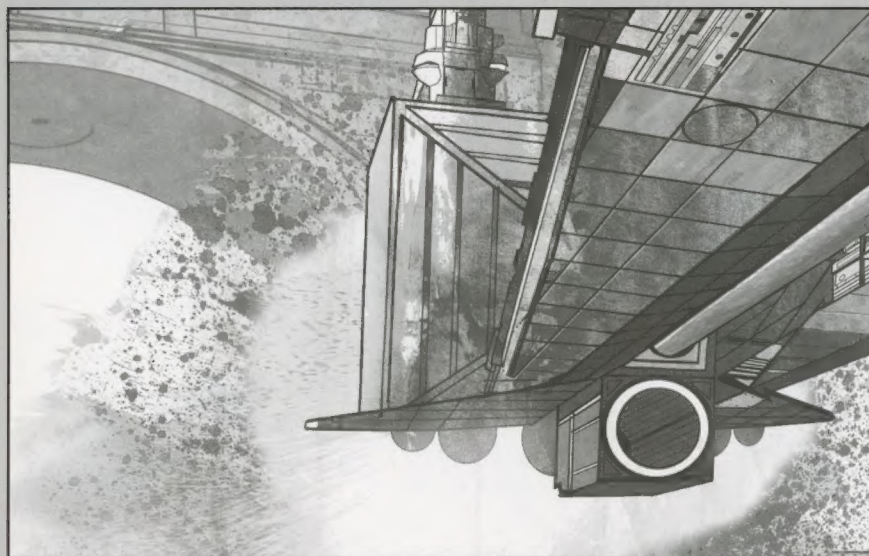
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AFRICA

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His Master's Voice

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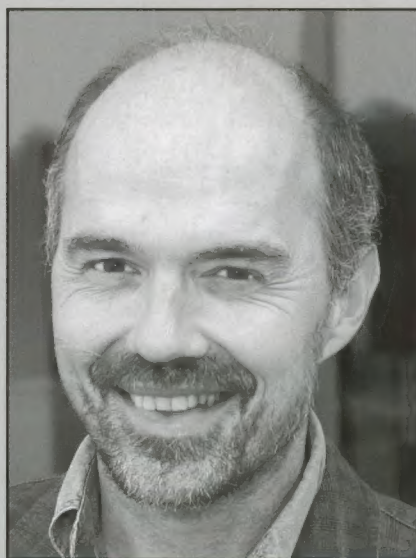
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Chris Beckett

plus interview by Andy Hedgecock



plus stories by

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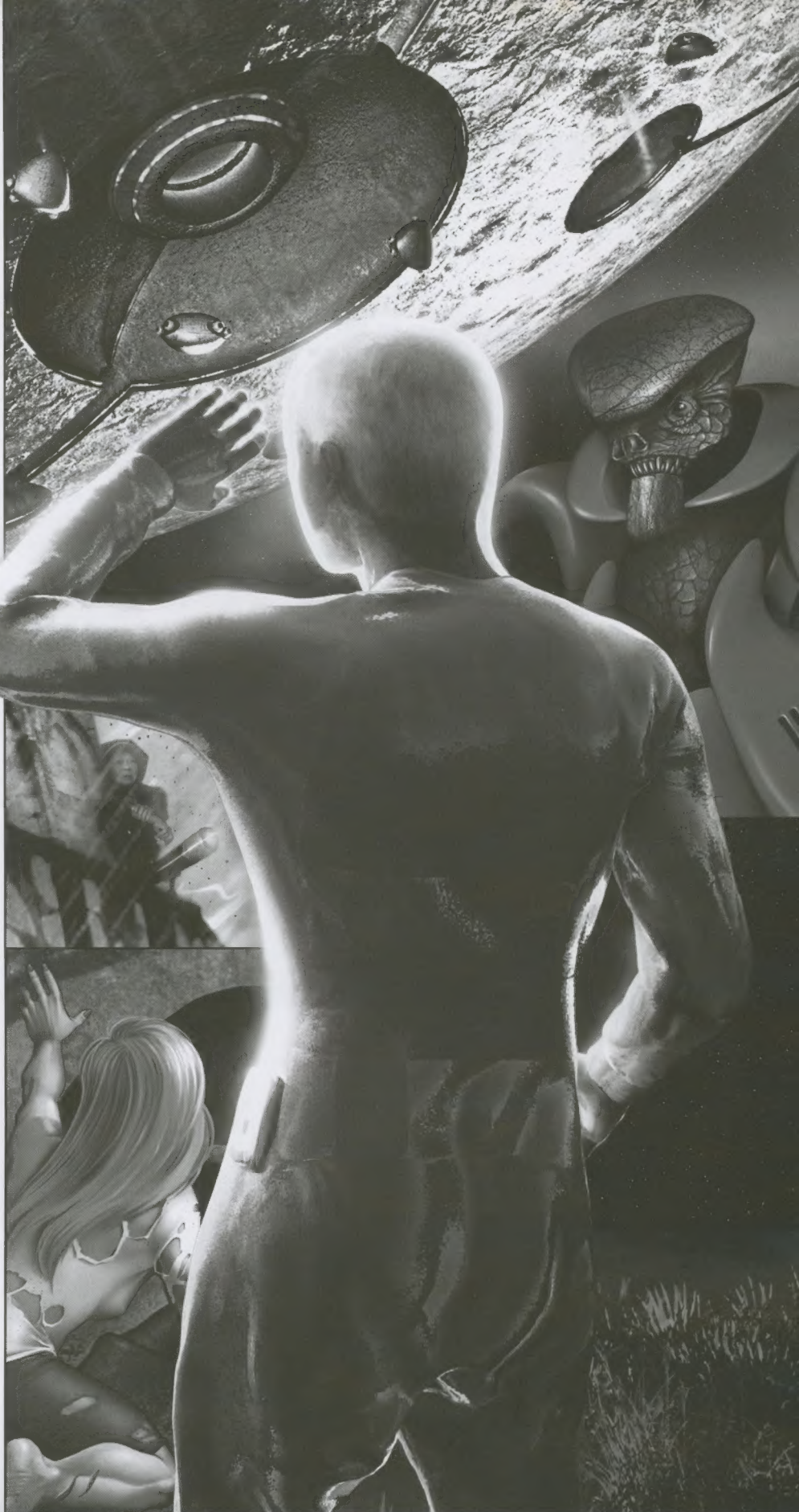
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Book Reviews



editorial

How will the Internet and electronic media affect readers, writers, and publishers in the future? As TTA Press's Electronic Editions Editor, I can't help but wonder about this. This year marks the first time iTunes has surpassed Wal-Mart as the number one music retailer in the world. What does that foreshadow?

Readers sometimes speculate about whether eBooks will supplant printed books entirely. I don't think so, but who knows? When was the last time you used a quill pen or read from your favourite scroll? Have you purchased our magazines at Fictionwise?

Currently, reading devices cost more than a CD or MP3 player. When prices come down significantly, eBooks should really take off. This will no doubt be seen as a boon by students who carry a huge pile of books on their backs.

Fortunately, eye strain caused by bright backlit screens has been solved through E-ink technology. It mimics real paper by using tiny microcapsules on a sheet of plastic film. This is laminated over a layer of circuitry to form electronic paper. I've seen this technology first hand on the Sony Reader, and it really does have the same reflective qualities as regular paper. Power is only used when the display is changed, so text can be displayed for weeks without power.

Audio Podcasts are another way that fiction is progressing from author to publisher to reader. In fact, this summer marks the launch of TTA Press's new audio podcast with stories from the pages of our magazines, past and present. Visit our website for details.

Print On Demand is changing the face of publishing. Libraries and bookstores are installing the Espresso Book Machine, which is capable of printing a 300 page paperback, complete with cover, in just three minutes. The \$50,000 machine produces these at a cost of \$3 each.

Change seems to be the only constant. Maybe one day a Worldcon supporting membership will get you a live videocast of the Hugo awards. Who knows. The universe is the limit.

Pete Bullock



Langford in obituary-writing costume

As Others See Buckminster Fuller.

'Fuller's themes often had the hallucinatory quality associated with science fiction (or mental hospitals).' (Elizabeth Kolbert, *New Yorker*, 9 June)

Novel Awards. *Arthur C. Clarke:* Richard Morgan, *Black Man* (US title *Thirteen*).

• *Nebula:* Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. • *Andre Norton* (YA *Nebula*): J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. • *James Tiptree Jr:* Sarah Hall, *The Carhullan Army*.

Doris Lessing regards her 2007 Nobel Prize as 'a bloody disaster'. Too much media attention, not enough time for work: 'All I do is give interviews and spend time being photographed.' And the writing? 'It

has stopped, I don't have any energy any more.' (Radio 4 interview)

As Others See Us. Sam Wollaston of the *Guardian* complains that 'Sci-fi has no smell' and bewails the effort of comprehending *Battlestar Galactica*'s season-four opening without having watched a single past episode: 'I don't understand half the complexities. (That, incidentally is another problem: it's so bloody complicated. Why is sci-fi like that – a competition for boys to see who's best at working out what the hell is going on?) [...] This obviously makes me a girl.'

Christopher Tolkien continues to litigate, with 'one last crusade' to 'terminate' rights to *The Hobbit* and block the planned films

ansible link • david langford

unless Warner/New Line cough up the claimed £80 million owed to the Tolkien estate from a deal that gave it 7.5% of profits.

As Others Sniff At Us. 'If you've been in any bookstore in your lifetime, you're probably familiar with that most peculiar of book retail locales: the Fantasy & Science Fiction section. This strange and sweaty place is kept separate from the rest of the bookstore so that its residents, the soap-averse fans of Fantasy & Science Fiction novels, can go about their plots and dark rituals without disturbing any of the normal-smelling clientele.' (Chris Bucholz, Cracked.com)

Salman Rushdie risks being declared Fair Game: 'I have an early novel by L. Ron Hubbard called *Death's Deputy*. You cannot believe the badness, it's almost physically unreadable because the man was functionally illiterate. The idea of him being a founder of a great world religion is just hilarious. I don't want to claim Hubbard as any type of influence as the horror that would bring my way would be a fate worse than death – there's Tom Cruise for a start! But I grew up on science fiction...' (Interview, June)

J.K. Rowling gave this year's Harvard commencement day address. Someone in the student paper *The Harvard Crimson* reacted by calling her 'a flash in the pan [...] a petty pop culture personality [who] tricked parents into letting their kids read books filled with sex, murder, and homosexual role models.' This led to a strange *Guardian* piece, 'When Harry met sexism', arguing that the biased critical establishment marginalizes female fantasists while praising Pullman and Tolkien in accordance with 'the dominant man-worshipping default mode.' Acclaim for Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. Le Guin doesn't count, since – the article explains – they merely occupy 'a few token high-priestess places for the ladies.'

Futurology Masterclass. 'The speed trend curve alone predicts that manned vehicles will be able to achieve near-infinite speeds by 1982...' 'By 1981, this [energy] trend

curve shows that a single man will have available under his control the amount of energy equivalent to that generated by the entire sun.' (G. Harry Stine, 'Science Fiction Is Too Conservative', *Analog*, 1961)

As Others Research Us. From a positive article on sf at the Glasgow Science Festival: 'The whole basis of the internet was famously inspired by William Gibson's book *Neuromancer* and Isaac Asimov, who recently died, "invented" earth-orbiting satellites in one of his tales.' (*Sunday Herald*)

Alaa Al Aswany, Egyptian novelist, denounces the New Wave: 'I am writing for ordinary people. I want everyone to be able to read my books. The problem with Arab literature has been that it forgot to tell stories and lost its way in experimentation. Too many novels that start with lines like "I came home to find my wife having sex with a cockroach."' (*New York Times*)

Thog's Masterclass

Fowl Play Dept. 'Ross Duval choked back an emotional swallow.' (Clark Howard,

'Cruel and Unusual', *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, 2008)

Alternate Tissue Dept. 'One of those old-fashioned protonic guns...they kill without damaging tissue, by destroying brain cells.' (Gardner F. Fox, *Escape Across the Cosmos*, 1964)

Dept of Misadventure. '...they were on the verge of being sucked under a lake of molten magnetic lava when, by sheer theoretical knowledge, they pulled out and made off into space once more. / A barrage of cosmic rays, turned on them by inhabitants of a queer, elongated planet, had almost spelled disaster, but radio beams saved them. / Once, in mid inter-planetary flight, they were brought to a dead stop. The cause? They had entered the "no-man's land" between two planets, where, opposed to all normal theory, the two worlds, acting in complete unison, were poised on the same plane, although millions of miles apart.' (Terence Haile, *Galaxies Ahead*, 1963) *Inexorable Fate Dept.* 'It would not be like that, but that was the way it would be.' (Michael Marshall Smith, *The Servants*, 2007) 'It was that way, but also it was not.' (*Ibid*)

R • I • P

Robert Asprin (1946–2008), US author whose first novel was *The Cold Cash War* (1977), died on 22 May aged 61. Asprin is best known for creating (with Lynn Abbey) the 'Thieves' World' fantasy shared world, and for his 'Phule' sf comedies (later with Peter J. Heck) and 'MythAdventures' comic fantasies (later with Jody Lynn Nye).

John Berkey (1932–2008), noted US sf artist whose work is collected in *The Art of John Berkey* (2003, text by Jane Frank), died on 29 April.

Algis Budrys (1931–2008), East Prussian/Lithuanian-born US author, critic and editor, died on 9 June; he was 77. In fiction he is remembered for the classic *Rogue Moon* (1960, aka *The Death Machine*) and many fine short stories; as critic, for the *Galaxy* review columns collected in *Benchmarks* (1984); as editor, for *Tomorrow SF* magazine and the *Writers of the Future*

anthologies. Other notable novels are *The Amsirs* and *the Iron Thorn* (1967), *Michaelmas* (1977) and the underrated *Hard Landing* (1993). Budrys received the 2007 Pilgrim award for criticism.

Alexander (Sandy) Courage (1919–2008), Emmy-winning composer of the USS *Enterprise* fanfare in *Star Trek* (reprised in *ST:TNG* and all the films), died on 15 May aged 88.

Michael de Larrabeiti (1934–2008), UK writer most noted in genre circles for the exhilaratingly uninhibited violence and language of his *Borribles* trilogy of children's novels, died on 18 April after long illness. He was 73.

Joseph Pevney (1911–2008), US director of 14 episodes of the original TV *Star Trek* and 11 of *The Munsters*, died on 18 May; he was 97.

Tomeer peered through the Inward Watcher, the adjustable lens in the clear floor on the station's underside. He wanted to see again the continent the first Guardians – those who had witnessed the Expulsion – had called Africa.

"Your time is best spent watching outward, not looking down at the surface," his father said suddenly from behind him. "Never allow yourself to be seduced by what we protect."

Tomeer sat back up and controlled his breathing. How long had his father stood there with his white hair and piercing eyes, still erect despite the tremble that had crept into his limbs in recent months? Tomeer had the same face, the same hair and eyes, the same purpose, though he was twenty and his father was three hundred. Yet his father still watched over him.

"The station will let us know if any of them come near," Tomeer said. "And how can we protect what we know nothing of?"

"The station merely supports us," his father answered. "It is up to us to carry out the task itself, as the Talienns intended. We must watch, and wait." He sighed and sat down slowly on a small stool near the Watcher.

"I will do as you ask, father," Tomeer said.

Yet he could not keep from putting his eye to the Watcher and looking down again. Miles below, the green mass – the place where humans had begun, Guardian legend said – reeled slowly by, the lush color rolling on and on over bountiful plains and forests, every detail distinct.

Not a trace of any human presence remained below. No structure of any kind. Not here, nor anywhere else on the surface of the Earth.

Tomeer zoomed the Watcher closer to see a herd of brown-backed animals flow from under some trees, down a hill, and across a river. Small ones tried to keep up with the larger herd, then pattered to a stop as the group halted and began grazing. The adult animals had horns, but those would not necessarily –

Danger! There! A skulking great cat emerged from under a single tree nearby, followed by another. The prey animals shifted, then bolted. The cats darted after them and closed on a young one that straggled, while the remainder of the herd fled, out of the Watcher's field of vision.

"What are you looking for?" asked his father. "The animals are born, they grow to adulthood, they mate, they bear young, they eat

or are eaten."

"Exactly," Tomeer said.

"Exactly what?"

"Exactly the things we are no longer capable of," he said.

Strilikan crawled into the bubble with them. Tomeer stroked the long, featherlike antennae, and Strilikan burbled, then sank down beside Tomeer, folding all of his legs into a compact pad under his body shell, so reminiscent of the station's shape.

Tomeer's father sniffed. He considered Strilikan an indulgence. Yet looking down through the Watcher again as the cats started tearing into the prey animal, Tomeer allowed himself a little feeling of satisfaction. After his father had created him and he had matured enough to develop his own interests, he had begun to experiment, to create in his turn, using the station's overlooked insects and his own ideas. Strilikan was the eventual result. Not a copy of himself to carry out the great purpose, another in the long line of Guardians, but a new creature altogether, for no purpose but Strilikan's own, whatever that might prove to be.

Strilikan's pincers could not only compress and slice, but stab as well – features of no use here, but nevertheless a pleasing accident. He was larger than his forebears by a factor that brought him above Tomeer's knee when they walked together. His glossy blue-black exoskeleton stood out against the station's faded colors, and his many legs, which had multiplied through the generations of his ancestors, took him anywhere and everywhere. His vocabulary was somewhat like that of Earth's birds, whose sounds had been preserved in the station's records by the very first Guardians and passed down through all the hundreds of years since.

Most importantly, Strilikan had not died like his predecessors.

The station, and thus the Watcher, had moved on, sliding randomly on the clear barrier membrane that enveloped the planet, seeming to trail the course of a great river. The station's position could be directed, but Tomeer's father had never seen a reason to do so.

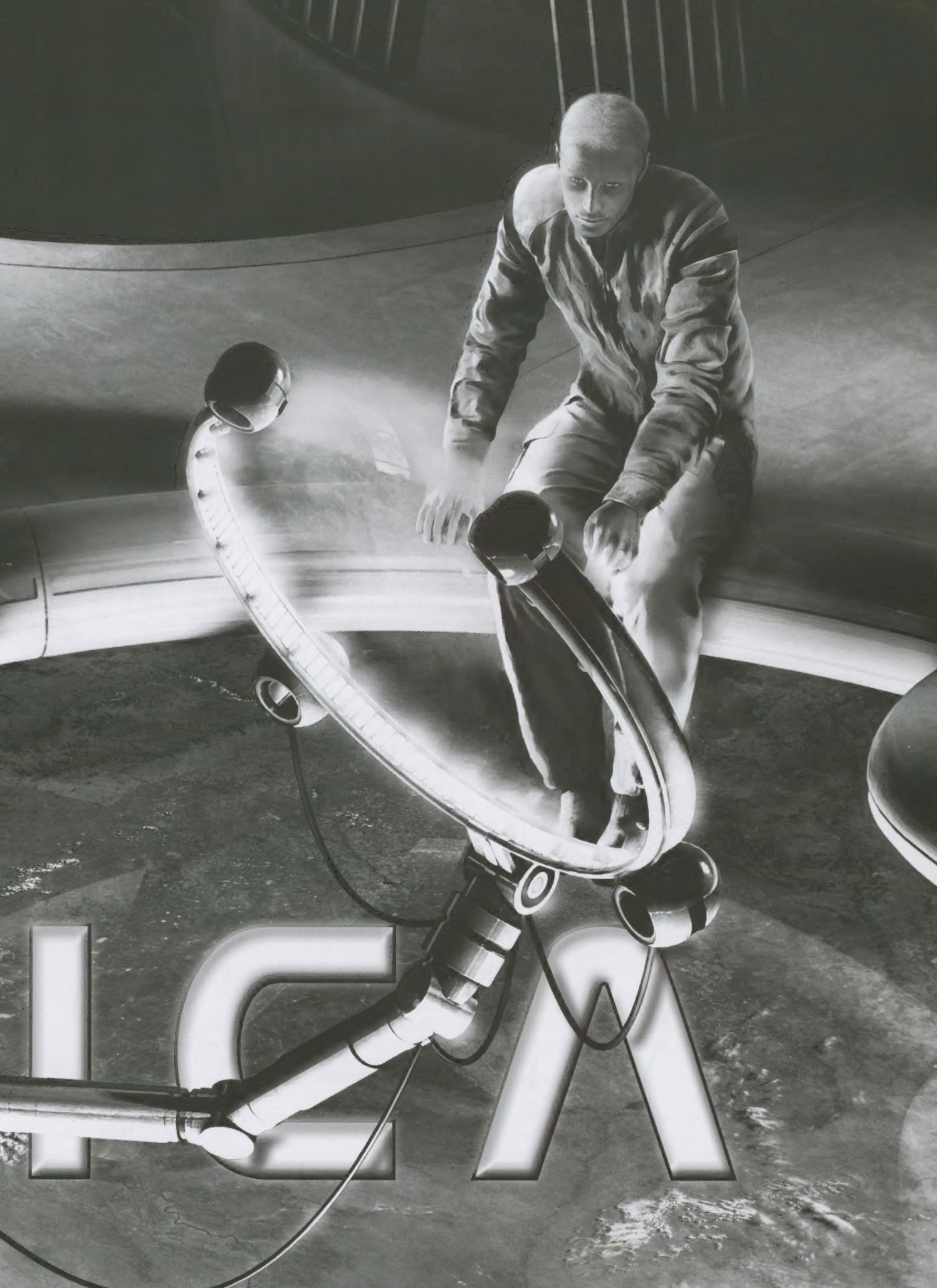
"Do you not love what we see?" Tomeer asked, gesturing below their feet. "Do you never wish to go to the surface and experience what the Talienns considered so important to preserve?"

"Go to the surface?" His father shuddered. "No. I belong here, as do you. As for love... Love requires vigilance. And painful choices. This is what the Talienns made us for. Now come. You have been

KAREN FISHLER

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ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL DRUMMOND



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observing for hours. You must eat something." He rose stiffly and clambered out of the bubble.

"I can decide that for myself," Tomeer said, climbing out behind him. "I am not a child." Strilikan followed them toward the dining chamber, his claws silent on the spongy walking surface.

"You are *my* child," his father returned.

"No, I am not," Tomeer said. "I am a copy – a copy of a copy of a copy."

His father placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him, and a look of tenderness came over his face that Tomeer had never seen.

"Do you believe I love you any less for that?" he said.

Then a high wail echoed through the empty station. The alarm keened through the corridors and thrummed in the walls themselves. And in Tomeer's body.

For the first time in his experience, someone was approaching the station. Approaching Earth. Someone who did not want to talk to the Guardians, to hear them, only to evade or defeat them. And it was up to Tomeer to help his father fulfill the purpose for which the Talienns had engineered a hand-picked group of humans, making them the first Guardians – the purpose for which all the Guardians who came after had been born, until their fertility dwindled away and they began cloning to reproduce themselves, with less and less success, so that now the only Guardians left were his father and himself. Copies of copies. Only the purpose itself remained.

"Address them," Tomeer's father said harshly, still breathing heavily. He signed at the alarm control and the piercing noise ceased.

Tomeer raised his hand to activate the communications array so he could speak to the approaching ship, but then paused.

"How long has it been, father?" he said. "How long since they last tried?"

His father's face worked, trying to control his contempt for the Expelled. "Seventy-six years," he said finally.

"Is that a long time between attempts?"

His father shook his head with a bitter smile. "It matters not how long it has been," he said. "They will never stop trying. Never. Now speak to them, or I will do it instead."

"I must look at the ship," Tomeer said. "I have never seen one, except in the records you have showed me."

He opened the great Outward Watcher, the huge dome that normally showed only space. The ship was not yet in realspace, but the display would find it and show what it looked like. Meanwhile the station had stopped moving. It would wait here for the approaching vessel. Before wandering again, it would lock the ship to an orbital position directly opposite, so it was always between the ship and the Earth.

Strilikan pattered into the control room and climbed onto the surface of the hub. Tomeer's father uttered a sound of distaste, but Tomeer only ushered Strilikan gently aside so the display could come up.

And there it was, shimmering to life in miniature form above the hub...one of the ships of the Expelled, a great bronze globe, finned and strapped and studded with exterior equipment, like a tiny planet.

"It is so big," Tomeer found himself saying. "Much bigger than the station. What they must have inside...so much room..."

"The Talienns were kind," his father said austere. "They gave the Expelled, the so-called victims, everything they could want."

"Except permission to land or live on any planet," Tomeer murmured. Strilikan trilled quietly in response.

Tomeer's hand trembled over the display controls. A sense of ab-

solute purpose had driven him, running at full tilt, down the corridors of the station to the control room. The design of the Talienns had held true.

Yet he found that he also felt pity, more than his father ever could. These people would never set their feet on the Earth or any other world, would never experience sunlight or hear wind moving the leaves of trees, or encounter a natural animal face to face. So, too, the Guardians themselves. His hand reached out farther and touched Strilikan, who pecked gently at it, one taloned pincer just grazing the skin.

Tomeer opened the communications array and spoke as his father had taught him. "Greetings from the Guardians of Earth. State your purpose, but know that there can be no return." He redistributed the message in numerous languages and in all the known codes. His father nodded in approval.

The ship suddenly appeared in realspace, filling the dome of the Outward Watcher, and drifted toward the station as if being pulled, the way the tidal waters far below were pulled by the Moon.

"State your purpose," Tomeer said again.

A burst of communication signal erupted from the ship.

"We ask permission to connect with your station," a woman's voice said. "Our need is...unique."

"You may not dock, and you may not orbit," Tomeer said, and his father nodded again. "You must depart. You know this."

Another noise burst.

"We are only two. We do not seek to return...not in the way the taboo forbids."

Tomeer looked at his father, hesitating, as the instruments confirmed that only two of the Expelled inhabited the ship.

"The taboo forbids *all* returns, no matter what kind," his father said. Tomeer looked away.

Another burst, more white noise. Then a sound filled the control deck that Tomeer had never heard. It took him several moments to identify it as the quiet sound of a single human, weeping.

Tomeer felt his mouth open to speak, but his father cut him off.

"You cannot return in any way whatever," his father said.

There was another quick signal burst, and this time it resolved not just into sound, but into an image as well. It hovered in front of the control array, dreamlike, present yet removed.

The weeping woman must have received an indication that her visage was transmitting, for she wiped her eyes and stared into the imager. She said nothing. Her hair was long, a pale red. Her face, damp with her tears and a little older than Tomeer's, held the emptiness of the great dark that surrounded the ship and the station and the planet below.

Around her Tomeer could see plants in the dim light, and someone else was there, a slowly shifting figure on a bed in the background.

Tomeer was transfixed. "Perhaps," he said, "we could –"

"Begone," his father told the woman. "There is no return. Your sadness will avail you nothing."

He shut down any transmission to the ship.

"How could you do that?" said Tomeer. "You heard her tell us she was not seeking to return, yet you treated her as if she were lying."

"That is what humans do," his father said. "They do whatever they think they must."

The woman had begun to weep again, although Tomeer could see that she was trying to compose herself.

"And what must we do, father?" he said. "Huddle here like insects, waiting to destroy any who come near lest they succeed in arousing our interest?"

"My son," his father said, and laid his hand on Tomeer's. "We are the Guardians. There is no one else left to protect what we both love – what the Talienns saved by expelling humankind. I had to transmit the great purpose to another. And I succeeded. You felt the call, I know you did."

His hand gripped Tomeer's.

"I did," Tomeer whispered. "I never knew it could be so strong. We are human like them. How can we live with this...requirement built into our bodies?"

"It is our fate," his father answered firmly. "And fortunate for the Earth that we are here."

They both looked again at the woman. She had heard nothing of their conversation.

"Please believe that I do not seek to return," she said, looking earnestly into the imager at her end. "I have only one request, and then I will leave. Hear me, Guardians. Please."

"Father," Tomeer said in a low voice. "If she means what she says, if she can have her request granted and go, we ought to listen. I have never met a...a real human."

His father yanked his hand away as if Strilikan had snapped at it. "Have you learned nothing?" he said. "I cannot believe you wish such a thing."

Tomeer looked up at him. "When you die," he said, "I will be alone – for the remainder of my life, unless I succeed in creating a successor as you have. May I not have the memory of someone besides ourselves, some instant of contact with another, that will sustain me through those long years? Help me, father."

"It is a violation!"

"I wish it so much."

His father stared at him as if wondering who Tomeer was. Then he collapsed in a chair, his attitude one of defeat, and passed a shaking hand over his face.

"I ought to do something definitive," he said, "something that will resolve your uncertainty – a right action in the eyes of our forebears and in the eyes of the Talienns. But of course I cannot. Because you are my son, and I love you. Nothing I do will change that. And nothing will satisfy you but what you ask for."

"You may speak with her. Briefly. But then she must go."

He creaked to his feet, turned his back on Tomeer, and left.

His father should have come with him onto the ship of the visitors, Tomeer reflected. But he had refused to leave the place where he had spent his entire life. Tomeer wondered if his father was afraid, an idea he could not conceive of voicing. His father had forbidden him to bring the woman onto the station.

Tomeer went into the transparent preparation chamber and enveloped himself in the soft clear membrane, like the one surrounding the Earth but adapted to his shape, that would protect him from infection while he was away from the station. The Talienns had provided them in case subduing attempted returnees required boarding their ships – he could touch objects through it just as he would normally, but no infectious agent would survive contact with it or pass through it in either direction. One of the station's rarely used translocators, the controls wrapped on Tomeer's left wrist, would move him to the woman's ship.

He took a great breath before activating it, fearing that it would cause him pain or that he would use the controls incorrectly. But it felt wonderful, as he imagined a wave of water would feel, if such a thing could move through one's body. His father, his face stricken, watched him go from the window in the chamber door, and –

For the first time Tomeer was in a made thing other than the

station. He stood there for a few moments, hardly able to take the fact into his awareness. The space around him vaulted away, the dim edges of the room that encompassed it too distant to see clearly. He felt his chest expand in response.

A figure in a gray robe approached him through the gloom, and he recognized the woman. His body shook for a moment with the unfamiliarity of her physical presence – of any person's presence other than that of his father.

Halting a few steps away, she said in a low voice, "I thank you and the other Guardians for speaking with me."

"Is this – is this the way your entire ship is?" he asked.

She nodded.

"It is empty, as you see," she said. "Only my father and I are left. Until recently, there was another family, but they evacuated themselves out of the lock together." She bowed her head. He realized that he could smell her body – the protective membrane must know the molecules that made up her aroma were harmless, otherwise it would not allow them through. The smell frightened him with its strangeness, yet he savored the soft tang at the back of his nose. Then he remembered to respond.

"I am sorry you and your father are alone," he said. "I am Tomeer the Guardian."

"I am Ainkia," she said.

"I will hear your request, although I cannot say whether it will be granted. But," he added, "there is time for that. I have never seen one of your ships from the inside."

Ainkia smiled a little. "Would you like me to show you how we have lived?"

And so she took him through much of the great ship, although it was far too big for them to walk the whole extent of it. Pathways spiraled through the central part, and plants grew everywhere. It was almost as green as Africa. A miniature sun hung suspended in the very center, and waxed and waned, Ainkia told him, according to human time-needs. This sun had begun to dim, and streamers of pink and orange light rippled through the air around them.

Around the central part ranked layer after layer of rooms, rooms of all kinds: rooms to eat in and sleep in, rooms to play in, rooms in which to make things, rooms in which people could gather in large groups. One after another, so many that Ainkia gave up trying to take him to all of them. It was unimaginable to him, how many people had once lived here.

"Where is your father?" he finally asked, as they stood in the central part once more. The miniature sun had changed itself into a pale globe, glowing from the center of the forest. He realized this was meant to remind the people who had lived here of the Moon. Starlike particles of light hovered high among the plants, as if one were truly looking out toward the heavens.

"He is no longer conscious," she said, and plucked a white flower from a nearby plant. She held it out to him.

Tomeer had learned about flowers in the Guardians' archives. He took the blossom in both hands. "What is his illness?" he asked.

"Age," she said. "Despair. Surrender. His heart is giving out. It was the same for all the others. That is why there are no other ships left, or at least no one inside them. Nothing specific was needed to destroy our species, you see. Surely the Talienns knew that. The separation from Earth was enough. He will be dead soon. I am grateful to have arrived before the end."

Even as she spoke, Tomeer suddenly smelled the flower and found himself bending his head to take in its fragrance. Its petals curved, arching back from a yellow center.

He had never held a comparable living thing in his hands, save

Strilikan and his predecessors. He thought of his father, a copy of a copy, far removed from the last Guardian who had been born instead of made.

"You are all gone?" he said. "All the ships are empty, all the three hundred that the Talienns sent away?"

For the first time he saw anger in her eyes.

"All," she said. "All. All dead. Those not destroyed by the Guardians when they tried to return..." She raised her hands, then let them fall. "Madness, violence amongst themselves, or despair and disease. As with us. As with my father."

"I am sorry," Tomeer said. "I wish I could help your father, but there is no technology the Talienns granted us that you would not already have. Our only superiority is in the shield around the Earth, and our weapons."

"I am aware of that," she said. "We grew up knowing it."

She turned to go, and he stopped her with a touch on her arm. Her skin felt warm, smooth.

"Tell me your request," he said.

She took a breath, almost a sob, her head still turned away.

"Come with me first," she said.

He followed her out of the central area of artificial night and up level after level, to a small room near the very top of the ship, where the ceilings leaned in as the great sphere curved to a close. A yellow light warmed the room, unlike the dim places she had showed him earlier. On a bed lay an old man, so thin he looked almost flat under the white sheets. This was what Tomeer and his father had seen when they communicated with the ship, Tomeer realized.

They approached. The man's eyes remained closed. He seemed older than Tomeer's father. They stood there in silence, listening to the rasp as his chest lifted up, then fell, lifted, then fell.

"How long has he lain here?" Tomeer whispered.

"Seven days," she answered in a low voice. "He can hear me and understand, I believe. But he cannot speak."

She bent to stroke his forehead. He moaned a little and opened his eyes. But they seemed vacant and soon closed.

Tomeer followed Ainkia out of the room, not wanting to admit to himself that he was horrified at the sight of the old man, relieved to be away from him.

"Once my father has died," Ainkia said, "I will no longer care about anything. I will steer the ship away from here and take my own life when I am ready. But he is the last of those who did care – those who would have given anything to breathe the air of Earth and drink her waters. When he is dead, there will be no more humans to trouble the Guardians but me, and the purpose of the Talienns will have been fulfilled. I believe it is fitting that he should be buried – there." And she waved a hand to indicate the surface below.

"That," she said, "is my request."

"The ship is astounding, father," Tomeer exclaimed. He heard himself go on and on: the plants, the appearance of the heavens created artificially inside the ship, space for so many humans, the beauty and surprise of it –

"But it is empty! They are all gone after this long time. All except her, and her father. He is ill. So ill he is dying."

"So am I," his father said. "You were gone too long."

Strilikan came into the room chewing the remains of a much smaller insect, likely from some corner of the station Tomeer and his father no longer used. Shreds of torn chitin dangling from his beak, he greeted Tomeer, who held out the fingers of one hand. Strilikan tapped the nails delicately with a pincer for a moment, then wandered away again.

"He is dying faster than you, father," said Tomeer. "Within days he will be dead, and Ainkia –"

He saw his father stiffen at his use of a name for a returnee, and raised his hands in apology.

"All she seeks is to bury him in Earth's own soil," he said. "Then she will go away, and when she is ready, she will end her life herself."

"There is nothing left of them, father," he went on. "Why would we not grant this request? Even if she herself remained on the surface, nothing could happen to harm the Earth. Thousands of people would be needed to reproduce and grow more numerous, otherwise they would die out quickly."

"The taboo is a moral imperative, not just a biological solution," his father snapped. "It is a judgment, and all humans must suffer its effects."

He turned his back and shuffled down the walkways to the birthing room. Tomeer followed. He watched from the doorway as his father began moving things about, shifting the precious machinery, the samplers, the crèches, like someone beginning a new project. Strilikan had reappeared and pattered along behind them. He began climbing up the birthing room's inside wall.

"Are you thinking of replacing me?" Tomeer asked. "Have I disappointed you?" He knew his tone was bitter.

"No one could replace you," his father said. He stopped his movements and bowed his head. "When you began developing, I spent many hours here watching you, making sure there were no mistakes. You seemed so miraculous. How could that be, when you were a copy of me? My own father, he from whom I was copied, treated me with coldness. He never felt toward me as I felt toward you. I wondered if I was wrong to have those feelings. But I could not help them."

Tomeer went and put his arms around his father. Then, releasing him, he said, "I want to do the right thing. I feel sorry for her. They suffered so much. To me, it does not seem a violation of the purpose to do this."

His father paused a long time before answering. Then finally he said, "I must think. Tell the woman you will speak with her once we have considered the request. Then go and sleep. I will wake you when it is time to talk."

Tomeer had never felt so close to his father as in that moment in the birthing room. They had never touched each other for so prolonged a period. It moved him.

And not only him, it seemed. For the next morning, his father told him he would allow the woman to visit the station for a time.

"It makes me unhappy to do this," he said. "But it would make you more unhappy if I rejected her completely. I cannot promise to grant her request, but she may look through the Inward Watcher."

"I will say that the other Guardians are unwilling to be seen by one of the Expelled, and you have all withdrawn to an inner chamber," Tomeer said.

"Agreed."

He gave Tomeer one hour with her. When the translocator brought her to the station, she took her first steps as Tomeer had done upon entering her ship, with wonder and fear. But Tomeer – who, mindful of his father's ill health, had placed one of the protective membranes over her, since it would keep infection from leaving her as well as from reaching her – showed her little of it, leading her quickly down the empty off-white corridors from the preparation chamber to the Inward Watcher.

"No human has ever been here?" she asked.

"No human of the Expulsion, you mean," Tomeer said.



A spasm crossed her face.

"The Guardians are not considered human by those of us who have wandered in space for uncounted years," she said.

Tomeer stopped at the entrance to the Watcher.

"I assure you, we are human," he said. "We always have been."

She did not answer. He sat her in the chair and showed her how to zoom the lens in and out with her fingertips, how to move it from side to side. Then he stood next to her.

She said nothing at all to him for that hour. She adjusted the lens again and again as this place or that one caught her attention. Still keeping Ainkia's ship with it, the station had drifted over the eastern part of the Great Asia continent. Tomeer had watched it many times, of course – the endless plains with their pale colors turning to green when the season changed and the sun shone more directly on the equator, the mountains with snow down to their feet. He could not imagine what seeing it for the first time must be like for her.

Finally he touched her arm, and she sat back. He had expected her to weep, but her face was dry.

Seeing his surprise, she said, "Tears would be a poor expression of what I feel."

He bowed and led her out, then halted, alarmed. Strilikan waited in the corridor, dancing on his legs in little circles, as if he had known not to come into the Watcher and startle the visitor. Ainkia, too, stopped at the sight of him. Tomeer went to herd him away, but she put a hand out to say no. Then she slowly approached Strilikan, who rose up onto the tips of all his legs to greet her. As his pincers reached out, Tomeer felt a thrill of fear – what if Strilikan should harm her, not knowing her importance? Yet the hard, sharp edges merely whispered over the tips of her outreached fingers. Strilikan circled her, touching her gently here and there.

"Where did he come from?" she said.

"I made him," Tomeer said.

She looked at him in surprise. "Have you so little to do that you create new life?" she said. "But...he is a wonder. How did you – we were not given animals in the ships. We were alone with each other."

"I know," Tomeer said. "I must send you back. I am sorry."

Reluctantly she gave up gazing at Strilikan, even as Tomeer ushered him away and led her to the preparation chamber.

"Wait," said Ainkia, before he could work the controls. She stepped forward and put her hands on his cheeks, and came close to his face. He gave a little gasp – her smell this near, reaching him through the clear softness of the membrane, was sweet, like the flower she had given him. She placed her lips on his. His hands went to her shoulders, then her back. Finally she stepped away.

"Thank you," she said, "on behalf of all the Expelled, for a glimpse of what never should have been denied us."

He was breathing quickly. "I will come to see you again later," he said. "If you agree, of course."

She smiled. "It will be my delight to sit with you again amid the flowers and the green," she said.

Then he pressed the controls, and she was gone.

.....
"At least explain your thinking," Tomeer said.

"There is nothing to explain," his father said. All day he had sat in the chair and looked down through the Inward Watcher. Strilikan, like someone angry about something, ran in and out of the round room, flinging himself against the clear bubble of the floor almost as if he were trying to escape and fall down to the surface, then the next moment leaving, only to rush up and down the corridor.

Tomeer's father shifted the lens again now with an inexperienced

finger. An enormous body of water spread out below, its outlines easily visible through the clear floor. Tomeer thought it was the one called the Ocean of Peace.

"I have considered the request of this woman," his father continued, "and decided against granting it. She has seen the Earth with her own eyes. That is far more, incalculably more, than any of the Expelled were ever to be granted."

"But, father, why –"

His father pulled his head away from the lens and fixed his gaze on Tomeer. "Why do you wish to do her bidding?" he said. "You are not as you were before she came."

Tomeer's face grew hot. "I am the same son who lives the purpose as you do," he said. "I have not changed."

"And would you argue as much for such a request to be granted if it were made by a man?"

Tomeer stared at him. "You are jealous," he said.

"No."

"You are afraid," he said.

"Yes." His father turned back to the lens, pretending to look below again.

"Afraid that I will bring her here to live," Tomeer said, "and somehow find a way to have children with her, and bring humans back to Earth – something you could never do."

"Tell me," his father said without looking at him, "that you have not considered doing exactly that."

Tomeer drew himself up. "You are not the only Guardian remaining," he said.

He turned to leave, but his father's voice stopped him.

"Tomeer," he said. "Always remember how much I love you. After three hundred years, that is what the Earth means to me. Love. What does it mean to you?"

.....
Ainkia was sitting next to her father's bed, as she had been when the ship first neared the station. Her long hair hung down. Her hands covered her face.

Tomeer sank to his knees in front of her and took her hands and kissed them. Tears wet her cheeks. He stroked them away, then rose and looked at her father.

He had never seen anyone who was dead, and he knew that his own father would look like this someday: a tensionless blank, a sleeper who would never wake. A wrinkled gray thing. It was what he himself would look like, hundreds of years from now.

Ainkia touched his hand, and he knelt again, taking her into his arms and slowly stroking her hair.

"I will bring you down to Earth," he whispered. "Just a few hours, no more. We will bury him, sing with the birds, and then return. No other Guardian will know."

She stiffened and sat up away from him. Her face, which was such a mystery to him, seemed to hold many expressions. Joy lit it, and astonishment, and anticipation. And something else, that he could not make out.

"A few hours," she said. "It is more than I hoped for."

He was careful to make no sound when he returned to the station. He had already enveloped himself in a fresh membrane against infection for the trip to Ainkia's ship.

When the translocator brought Ainkia to the station a few hours later, her father's body lay at her feet. She still wore the membrane Tomeer had placed over her on her first visit. He cast another over the body, in case it should bring some infectious agent to the Earth.

Strilikan came into the preparation chamber and walked onto Ainkia's father's corpse and stood on its chest. She gasped, but

Strilikan gently touched the dead man's face with his pincers, feeling his cheeks, his nose, his forehead. Then he went to Tomeer and to Ainkia, plucking at their clothing. Finally Tomeer pulled him into the corridor and closed the clear wall against him. Strilikan beat his legs against the impervious surface as if it were a drum.

Ainkia had brought two tools, implements the people on her ship had used to work the soil under the plants in their central space. She would use one of the tools to dig a place in the ground for her father. And Tomeer had decided he would help.

He had already moved the station where he wanted them to go, and set it to stay above them for several hours. It was all he dared. He hoped it would be enough.

When the wave stopped, they stood absolutely still. Tomeer held his breath, then let Ainkia go, and took a few steps from her to stand by himself.

A plain fell away before them, dotted with trees, until a river wandered across its path. In the far distance a great mountain rose up in a perfect cone shape, covering much of the horizon. Whiteness, which he knew to be snow, made the mountain almost melt into the white-blue of the atmosphere.

It was morning. The sun, the filtered disk he had always seen in the black of space, hovered behind them in the sky, netted by pale blue. He could feel the air, and his own skin, being warmed by it. A smell came to him – it was just as he had expected, really, exactly the smell of moisture and uncounched living things that he thought the green of Africa would have.

He turned. A forest rose behind them, the tips of the trees so high he could hardly make out their detail. And a clamor rose from it, a buzzing and a beating and a hiss of life.

He thought of Strilikan, and of how far his many legs could take him here, pattering away on great journeys of exploration, off into the wild unknown.

As he looked up into the exquisite blue, a swarm of birds flew out from the forest and over his head with a great flutter-flap of wings. He followed them with his gaze, turning, until they disappeared over the plain toward the mountain in the distance.

He went back to Ainkia. She knelt by her father's body. The protective membrane softened her sunlit edges. The digging tool was in her hands, but she had done nothing. Her face was upturned, as Tomeer's had been.

Then her eyes flickered to something behind Tomeer. She sprang to her feet. Tomeer whirled.

His father stood there, watching them. He breathed hard, his face a mask of rage. "Did you not think I would know?" he said.

A heavy, hot feeling swept over Tomeer: shame. "Father, no harm will come of our being here," he said. "Is it not beautiful? Surely an hour or two –"

"Violation! You have violated the purpose!" his father exclaimed. "You have betrayed us!" He strode forward and struck Tomeer to the grass. Tomeer's breath thumped out of him when he hit the ground. He gasped, and in his intake of breath, he smelled the green blades and the life that had pushed them up out of the soil.

His father coughed, almost doubling over with the effort, then staggered toward Ainkia, ready to fire the weapon raised in both his hands.

Tomeer scrambled to his feet. He launched himself at his father, not quite knocking him over but shoving his aim aside so that the bolt of energy hit behind Ainkia. The harsh crack caused all three of them to jump. Tomeer jerked the weapon out of his father's hands.

"No more killing, father," he said. "No more. You are ill. You have

no strength for this. And you did not cast a membrane over yourself. There is no filter between you and the Earth. It may take harm from you, and you from it. Why, why did you do this?"

His father coughed again, swaying, but said nothing. He was ill, indeed, and not only in his body.

"I am sending you back to the station," Tomeer said. He made sure his father would stay upright, then used the controls on his own wristband. His father lifted his hands in protest, but it was too late. He was gone.

"I must return to keep him there," Tomeer told Ainkia, shaking. "We should not have come to the surface. You must return with me."

She shook her head. "You did right to bring me here," she said. "Regardless of what he thinks, this is where I belong. Let me stay, at least for a little. Let me bury my father."

Tomeer looked at the green around them, at the sky, at a moving tree above. "Bury him," he said. "I will tend to my own father. Then I will come down again for you."

He pressed the controls and rode the wave.

His father lay on the floor in the preparation room, not quite unconscious. Strilikan danced in agitation around him. Tomeer lifted him up and carried him to his bedroom.

His father lay pale, somehow thinner, already less present, so quickly had the struggle on the surface sapped his ancient body. And perhaps some infection from Earth's air was already taking hold, or his blood vessels had betrayed him. Regardless. Death was coming, a power greater even than the Talienns. And it was coming soon. Tomeer had seen it in Strilikan's predecessors, and he could tell.

Strilikan pattered up and down the walls, like someone pacing.

"Father," Tomeer said, stroking the milk-white hand. His father's eyes opened very wide and his head turned toward him, but it was as if he could not see Tomeer. His hand groped to Tomeer's face and moved over it.

"Love is what I meant," he murmured.

He fell asleep, his breath wheezing.

Tomeer brought the floating carts with monitors and medications and followed the instructions to press blue oblongs into his father's arm, where the oblongs suddenly passed through the skin and disappeared. But over the next few hours, there was little change.

On the way back from the hospital spiral, where he had looked in vain for further help, he passed the control room. He looked in and stopped. Something was missing. He walked inside and stood there, surrounded by utter silence, looking up through the Outward Watcher at space, at the empty place where Ainkia's ship had been – and was no more. His father had destroyed it before translocating himself down to Earth's surface.

Tomeer could not take it in. He felt nauseous. Something hard and heavy seemed to sit in his chest. He went back to his father's bedroom and collapsed in a chair. He stared at his father's face. His own face.

Suddenly he woke with a horrible start. His father was still asleep. Strilikan clung to the wall halfway to the ceiling, pulsing gently off the surface every time he exhaled.

Tomeer rushed to the Inward Watcher and looked down, knowing he must have slept for a long time, knowing what he would find. Darkness cloaked the Earth, and just visible were the outlines not of Africa, but of the Amerique Sud, its long tail snaking toward the southern pole.

He pounded down the corridor to the control room. Strilikan had woken up, too; he skittered after Tomeer with a shrilling sound. Tomeer had only frozen the station's location for several hours, and

it had finally resumed its random wandering on the Earth's protective membrane. He could speed up the rate at which the station traveled on the surface of the barrier, but still, it would be hours before they once again reached the place in orbit that put them over that same spot, her spot, so he could look down and see her. It would be night again, or perhaps another morning – he had not done the calculations – but she would be alone, and she had no weapon, and she dared not leave that place because she knew he would be coming for her. What of the great cats? What of the other dangers that might lurk there?

He set up the pathway, using the records of his translocation with Ainkia. Then he went back to the bedroom. He parted the lids of one of his father's eyes with his fingers. The eyeball stared beyond his face. Tomeer let the lids come together again, like hands closing in prayer, and walked the halls. As the hours passed, the station moved closer to its goal, and finally the coast of Africa floated below the Inward Watcher, slowly, so slowly, the line that marked the sun's light pearly over it.

They were close now. He zoomed the view down, down, down, moved the lens this way, that way. Trees, a rocky outcropping – was he in the wrong place? – no, there was the sloping plain flowing away from the forest, and Ainkia.

Tomeer gasped.

She had the digging tool in both hands and swung it to and fro, trying to keep the animals around her away from her, and from her father's body. A small dirt pile nearby showed the progress she had made in digging.

Tomeer recognized the animals. He had seen them eat both other living creatures and carrion. They moved with a strange, hump-backed gait in shifting groups.

He struck his head with his fist in agony. He could not leave his father. And she could not reach safety – he had not placed a marker on her or her father's body, so the translocators could not find them to lift them away.

He must go down to her. It would only take a moment. Abruptly he thought of the weapon his father had used, still lying on the preparation room floor, and sprinted down the corridor.

But before he arrived, the alarm sounded. He stopped in his tracks. "No!" he cried out. His voice merged with the alarm's wail, the urgency of the call pounding in his body like a heavy pulse.

He raced to the control room. Surely he would have the moments he needed to bring the weapon down to Ainkia and help her before dealing with whatever threat faced the station.

Then he brought up the displays, and everything in him shrank to a cold stillness.

A fleet of ships, huge bronze globes, about to burst into realspace. How many? He counted, his heart thudding so fast there was hardly time between beats. Thirteen.

Thirteen ships would hold enough humans for them to be a viable population. The Earth could be repopulated.

The weapon was near, the one that Ainkia needed so desperately. He thought of her down there, struggling, close to death, while he stood here frozen, deciding what to do.

These ships...had she known? Had she lied? Or had she acted in ignorance? He closed his eyes, remembering the touch of her lips, the smell of the white flower, the look in her eyes as she stood on the soil of Africa.

One more moment he paused. Then he reached out a quivering fingertip and thought, not quite knowing who he was saying it to, *Forgive me.*

And activated, in sequence, the great weapons that pulsed their

energy-crushing waves out at one ship after another. Saw the perfect bronze globes wrinkle, deform, lose their adhesion to reality. Saw them disappear, as if engulfed by the black maw of some ravening beast, hungrier than any on the surface of the Earth. He felt something disappear from the center of himself at the same time, extinguished utterly. Something he would remember through the long years ahead, but would never have again.

"I thought you had forgotten me," Ainkia said.

"I will never forget you," said Tomeer. "Are you injured?"

"Only slightly."

He treated her small scratches while the reek of the beasts' bodies rose around them, a stench of blood and tissue let loose from their boundaries. Then, as she knelt by her father's body and touched the pale gashes the animals had made, Tomeer went from carcass to carcass, using the weapon to superheat each one. He burned them almost to vaporization. Earth's animals had a strong smell sense, he knew. He wanted to make sure none would be attracted here by the bodies of their own kind. It was the work of only a few moments.

He went back to Ainkia, and she looked up at him. She seemed tired, but deeply relaxed, and somehow alight. The emptiness in her had been filled, just by being here.

"How did you fare in the darkness?" he said.

"I made a fire," she said, and pointed. A ragged slip of flame, almost invisible in the sunlight, still wavered at the tip of a round heap of sticks nearby.

"My father is ill," he said. "I would have come before. But I fell asleep without realizing it."

"How is he?"

"Dying, I think," he said.

"I am sorry," she said.

Tomeer allowed himself to really look at her then, to take her entire face in and memorize it: the smooth pale planes of her cheeks, the undulation of her hair placed back behind her ears, the part of her lips as she returned his gaze, the depth of her eyes, their greenness. Her determination, so obvious to him now.

"There were ships," he said. "Ships that came. Thirteen."

She took in a breath and stood up. They stared at each other in silence. Tomeer heard birds in the distance. The light was very beautiful this morning. Golden.

"What did you do?" she said.

It was as if someone had taken his chest and squeezed it in a great hand. "You knew?"

She said nothing.

"You knew," he repeated. It was no longer a question. "You arranged for them to come here, made me soften, knowing I would have to make that choice."

"It was a choice?" she said, her voice even more bitter than his. "It was difficult for you?"

"It was difficult," he said. "Did you think it would be otherwise?"

She seemed to tremble then. "I realized as soon as I came to the station that there was nobody left except for you and your father. I know when a place is empty. And even from the sound of his voice, I knew he would not help us. But I thought differently of *you*."

They both were silent. Tomeer heard the snap of the nearby flame, and smelled the heat from what remained of the carcasses.

"You were right," Tomeer said. "I am different, thanks to you. Making these choices now hurts me more."

Her gaze dropped to the weapon in his hand, then came back up to his face.

"I could never harm you," he said. "I wanted only to help you. I

still do."

He backed away and slowly set the weapon on the ground, his eyes never leaving her face. Then he pressed the controls on his arm, and the Earth disappeared from his vision.

Twice his father opened his eyes, once to look over Tomeer's shoulder, once to gaze at his face. But the person whose eyes stared into Tomeer's was seeing something else, something beyond the realm of humans and Guardians.

Tomeer did the things the medical apparatus advised him to do, and watched the brief, temporary upticks of life energy.

Meanwhile he had set the station's controls to stay directly over where Ainkia dug into the Earth. Hour after hour she labored to make a large hole. When Tomeer slipped his fingers away from his father's veiny hand and went to make sure she had survived a little bit longer, the hole had gotten wider as well as deeper.

In the African afternoon, when she had not yet finished, he was by his father's bed. His father suddenly squeezed his hand. Tomeer sat forward and stroked the white brow.

"Father," he said.

Slowly his father's eyes opened. The sagging face turned slightly, and the eyes saw him.

Tomeer's stomach clenched, and his face trembled with the effort not to twist. But it did twist. His mouth pulled downward, his eyes squeezed almost shut. Tears blinded him. His father was dying, dying, and nothing would stop it.

"Father," he whispered again.

His father suddenly gave the smallest tug on his hand, and Tomeer bent close.

His father gave a whisper, very slow. "Sorry to leave you alone."

"Father, don't go, I love you, I'm sorry, I am a Guardian too, I can prove it...don't go, don't go, don't, please!"

But silence was the answer.

And Tomeer dropped his head on his father's shoulder and began to sob, heaving gasping sobs that no one witnessed or heard besides Strilikan, whose steps pattered as raindrops in a storm might have done, if he and Tomeer had been on Earth. Except that they were not.

He stood in the preparation room and placed the translocator marker on his father's chest. He had bathed the body, thin and cold beyond anything he thought possible, the skin so fragile it had started layering off in his hands. He wrapped it carefully in fine white robes still preserved in the storerooms from hundreds of years before, the embroidery running in lines like runes down the length of the cloth to his father's feet. It had seemed only fitting to clothe him in the remnants of the Guardians' majesty. Strilikan plucked at the robes, as if trying to keep Tomeer's father on the station, until finally Tomeer gathered Strilikan in his arms and lifted him away. Strilikan's legs wrapped around him like a web, the wiry exoskeleton hairs pricking him here and there, the hard disk-like body pressing against his chest.

He would have wanted more time with his father's body – he would have liked to spend the rest of his life with it, so reluctant was he to let it go – but Ainkia had finished digging the grave for her father. The sun would set in a few hours. He had to send his father now.

Expelled and Guardian in the same grave.

She would know that was what he meant her to do.

He barely slept. Strilikan never left him. Sometimes he curled up on

the floor of a corridor and Strilikan sang to him, warbling songs in a curdled soothing voice.

Once he found himself on the floor of the birthing room and could not think how he had gotten there or why he had come, except to remember his conversation there with his father and wish it had gone better.

From there, unable to stand, he crawled to the dining chamber, as Strilikan pattered beside him. He put food on a plate and sat on the floor sharing with Strilikan, taking one slow bite for himself, then offering the next to Strilikan on his fingers. Strilikan took it with his beak, the hard horn gently scraping his skin. Tomeer set a bowl of water down in front of Strilikan, who extended his proboscis and sucked deeply, then withdrew the slender black tube and snapped his beak two or three times with satisfaction.

Slumped against the wall, Tomeer stared at Strilikan, feeling he had never seen him before. Strilikan clambered onto his lap and folded his legs under his carapace. Tomeer stroked the hard, curving joints that stuck out beyond the edge of the shell, touching with respect and even awe the razored pincers, feeling the sheeny surface of the body.

"Time to cast a membrane over you, Strilikan," he whispered, and carefully kissed the blue-black dome of Strilikan's back. "Going on a journey."

He looked down through the Inward Watcher. The sun streaked golden over the green land. He waited patiently for what he sought, the thing that would help him get through one more day.

Finally they appeared, walking side by side up the rim of the forest toward the top of the open slope where Tomeer had left Ainkia. They had hunted early this time. And it appeared Strilikan had killed something again. It had happened more and more often lately, Ainkia shouldering a horned animal, walking slowly under the weight of it, Strilikan dragging the corpse of some smaller creature behind him with one or two of his pincers.

Tomeer had decided to wait until Ainkia and Strilikan were dead before he tried to make a copy of himself. There would be fewer questions. If he succeeded, he and his son would carry out the purpose together through the hundreds of years until Tomeer's own death.

He adjusted the lens.

Ainkia had dropped her prey on the ground at her camp, as Strilikan had dropped his. She tossed something at Strilikan. He caught it in his pincers and threw it back at her. She threw it again, he caught and returned it.

Now she moved away, and Strilikan followed her, catching the object, then returning it. Tomeer zoomed as close as he could, close enough to see that it was a ball of gray, perhaps made of some of Ainkia's own clothing tied together into a bundle. She ran down the slope toward the river, her hair streaming like a scarf behind her, Strilikan scampering around her, the two of them tossing the ball to and fro. It was something Tomeer had never seen. Something that humans and animals did, but not Guardians. Play.

Tomeer smiled. And the sun rose ever higher, and turned the eternal green of Africa to golden fire. ☼

Clarion West graduate Karen Fishler made her short-fiction debut with 'Miko' in *The Third Alternative* (now called *Black Static*), which was soon followed by a second story 'Mission Memory'. Since then she has sold several stories to publications like *Realms of Fantasy*, *The Infinite Matrix* and *Interzone* ('Someone Else' in issue 194, 'Among the Living' in issue 203). She lives with her husband Barry in West Seattle and works as a coach (visit Karen's website at fishler.com for more information).

THE TWO-HEADED GIRL
the two-headed girl
BY PAUL G. TREMBLAY

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I have to keep swinging an extra fifteen minutes before I can go downtown and to the Little Red Bookstore, because Mom wants to run the dishwasher and the blender tonight. I wonder if my time on the swing will generate enough extra juice for those appliances, or even if she's telling me the truth. I've been having a hard time with telling-truth or truth-telling.

Anne Frank is on my left again. I only ever get to see her in profile. Whenever I'm around a mirror she is always someone else. Today, she's the early-in-her diary Anne, the same age as me. Anne spent most of my swinging afternoon pining for Peter. But now she wants to talk to Lies, her best friend before the war.

She says, "I feel so guilty, Lies. I wish I could take you into hiding with me."

I get this odd, stomach-knotty thrill and I pretend that she really knows me and she is really talking to me. But at the same time, I don't like it when she calls me Lies. I say, "I'm sorry, Anne, but I'm Veronica." The words come out louder than I intended. I'm not mad at her. I could never be mad at Anne. It's just hard to speak normally when on the downswing.

Anne moves on, talks about her parents and older sister, and then how much she dislikes that ungrateful dentist they took in.

"Nobody likes dentists," I say and I want her to laugh. She doesn't. I only hear dead leaves making their autumn sounds as they blow up against the neighbor's giant fence and our swing set and generator.

Mom sticks her only head out of the kitchen window and yells, "Looks like we need another fifteen minutes, sorry honey. I promise I'll get Mr Bob out here tomorrow to tune everything up."

This is not good news. My back hurts and my legs are numb already. She's promised me Mr Bob every day for a week. She's made a lot of promises.

"Hi, Veronica." It's that little blond boy from across the street. He's become part of my daily swing-routine: when I come out, he starts off hiding in our thick bushes, then he sneaks along the perimeter of my neighbor's beanstalk-tall, wooden plank fence, and then sits next to the swing set and generator.

"Hi, Jeffrey," I say. Jeffrey has a withered left arm. Anne is quiet. Both of us try not to stare at it.

He says, "Where's your Dad?" His little kindergarten voice makes me smile even though I'm sick of that particular question.

"I don't know, Jeffrey. Just like I didn't know yesterday, and the day before yesterday." I try not to be mean or curt with him. He's the only kid in town who talks to me.

Anne says, "My Dad is hiding in the annex."

Jeffrey stays on my right, which is closer to my head. He only talks to me. I know it makes Anne lonely and sad, which makes me lonely and sad, just like her diary did. I don't remember what came first: me reading the diary or Anne making a regular rotation as my other head.

Jeffrey says, "You should ask your Mom or somebody where he is."

I know Jeffrey doesn't realize what he's asking of me. Just like I know people never realize how much their words hurt. Sometimes almost as much as what isn't said.

I say what I always say: "I'll think about it."

"Can I ride on the swing?"

Anne is mumbling something under her breath. My heart breaks all over again. I say, "No, sorry, Jeffrey. I can't let you. You'd have to ask my mother." I find it easier to blame everything on Mom, even if it isn't fair.

Jeffrey mashes his fully developed right fist into his cheek, an overly dramatic but affective pantomime of I-never-get-to-do-anything-fun.

I say, "Do you want to walk downtown with me when I'm done?"

He nods.

"Go ask your parents first."

Jeffrey runs off. With his little legs pumping and back turned to me, I let myself stare at the flopping and mostly empty left arm of his thin, grey sweatshirt. I watch him scoot onto his front lawn and past a sagging scarecrow, a decoration left out too long.

My legs tingle with pins and needles, and Anne is crying. I wish I could console her, but I can't. And now I'm thinking about the question I've always wanted to ask Anne, but never have because I'm a coward. I could ask her now, but it isn't the right time, or at least, that's what I tell myself. So we just keep swinging; a pendulum of her tears and me.

Jeffrey and I are downtown, playing a game on the cobblestones. I have to step on stones in a diagonal pattern. Jeffrey has to step on the darkest stones. I've seen him miss a few but I won't call him on it. I'll let him win.

Anne is gone and Medusa has taken her place. She is my least favorite head. Not because she is a gorgon. Just the opposite: I wish she was more gorgon-esque. Medusa is completely un-aggressive, head and eyes always turned down and she doesn't say boo. I feel bad for her, and I hate Athena for turning Medusa into a hideous monster because she had the audacity to be raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple. Athena was the one with the big-time jealousy and beauty issues, kind of like my mother. I used to try and talk to Medusa, to make her feel better about herself. I'd tell her that her physical or social appearance doesn't measure her worth and that her name means *sovereign female wisdom*, which I think is really cool for a name, so much cooler than my name which means *true image*. But she never says anything back and when I talk her snakes tickle my neck with their forked tongues.

Jeffrey shouts, "I'm winning," even though he keeps falling off dark stones onto light stones. Balancing with only one arm must

be difficult.

I say, "You're really good at this game."

It's getting dark and I know Mom will be mad at me for being so late, but I'm allowing myself to champion the petty act of defiance. We make it to the Little Red Bookstore with its clapboard walls, cathedral ceiling, and giant mahogany bookcases with the customer scaffolding planks jutting out at the higher levels. There are people everywhere. Customers occupy the plush reading chairs and couches, the planks, and the seven rolling stack-ladders. I hold Jeffrey's hand as we wade through the crowd toward the fiction section. No one notices us.

Jeffrey is as patient as he can be, but soon he's tugging at my arm and skirt, asking if we can find dinosaur books, then asking if we can go home. I need a stack-ladder to go after the books I want. They're still all taken. But even if I could get a ladder, I can't leave Jeffrey unattended and he can't climb the ladder and walk the bookcase scaffolding with me. So I grab a random book, something I've never heard of by someone I've never heard of, because I have to buy something. Then I walk Jeffrey to the kid section and to some dinosaur books. He sits on the ground with a pop-up book in his lap. He knows all the dinosaur names, even the complex ones with silent letters and *phs* everywhere, and I've never understood why boys love the monsters that scare them so much. Above my heads, people climb in and out of the ladders and platforms and book stacks.

I say to Medusa, "I think they look like bees in a honeycomb." Medusa sighs and doesn't lift her head.

Jeffrey sounds out an armored dinosaur's name, an-kie-low-saur-us, ankylosaurus, then he stands and swings an imaginary tail at me.

I say to Medusa, "Come on. Tell me what you think. Something. Anything!"

Medusa's snakes stir, rubbing up against my neck. She says, "Unlike my sisters, I'm mortal."

Everyone in and above the stacks stops what they are doing and looks at us, looks at Medusa, who for once returns their stares. No one turns to stone, at least not against their will, and I know it's time for us to go. The customers look upset with us, likely because we shouldn't be talking about mortality in a bookstore.

I brush a particularly frisky snake off my neck and I say, "Me, too," but enough time has passed so I'm not sure if Medusa knows I'm responding to what she said. Communication is so difficult sometimes.

We walk to the register and pay for the book I don't want.

It's dark when I get home. Mom is sitting at the kitchen table. She's dressed to go out even though she won't. Tight candy-red top, the same red as her lipstick, with a black poodle skirt. Her black hair bobs at her shoulders. She could be my sister back from college ready to tell me all she's learned about life and love as a woman. But she's not.

There are two white, Irish-knit, turtleneck sweaters on her lap. On the counter, the blender is dirty with its plastic walls dripping something creamy. The dishwasher is in a loud rinse cycle. My dinner is on a plate, hidden under a crinkled, re-used piece of tinfoil.

Mom says, "You shouldn't keep Jeffrey out so late. He's only five years old. You know better than that." Her voice is naturally loud. She looks at me quick, like a jab. Then she goes up the left side of one sweater with the scissors.

She's right. But I'm not going to acknowledge her rightness. Just like Mom won't acknowledge that my other head is Jeanne D'Arc. I

say, "Jeffrey had a great time at the bookstore and his parents were fine with it." Suddenly not quite ready for an argument to start, I add, "Everything okay with the blender and dishwasher?"

Jeanne whispers a prayer, covering her face with my left hand, very pious and humble.

Mom says, "So far so good, thanks for asking. You're such a sweetheart." Mom goes up the right side of the other sweater. She works so very fast. "It's going to be cold out tomorrow, so I'm making you a nice, warm, and presentable sweater." She says presentable as if anyone will see me. Mom gets up and goes to her sewing machine next to the kitchen table. I wonder if Mom planned the sewing machine into this evening's allotment of electricity and then I'm worried that I didn't spend enough time on the swing today, and then I hate myself for being so trained.

I say, "What's for dinner?"

"Mushroom chicken, corn, rice pilaf. Go wash up first. And you are going to do your math and science homework tonight, Veronica. No excuses. I can't put off your exams any longer. They're due in the post in three days."

I mix truth with a lie. "I bought a book that I really want to read first."

"Tomorrow night is your book club and the next night you have to take the exams. You are going to do your homework tonight."

Mom is always so reasonable, and I hate it. Makes me feel like I'm the bad one for wanting to fight. I say, "I don't care," but not very loud. I think Mom is going to let it slide, but then she breaks protocol by commenting on my other head.

"Why is there a boy on your shoulder?"

Jeanne crosses herself.

I don't know what to say. Other than when she's making two-headed clothing, Mom usually ignores my other head. I manage to say, "Real nice, Mom. She's Joan of Arc." I don't say her name in French because I don't want to remind Mom that she hasn't given me a French unit to work on in almost two weeks.

"I didn't say that to be mean, Veronica."

"Then why did you say it?"

She stares at me. "I won't let you start another fight with me over nothing," she says and turns on the sewing machine.

I throw myself into a chair and pick at my lukewarm dinner. I don't wait for Jeanne to say grace.

There's a spider fern hanging above Mom and the sewing machine. Some of its leaves are browning. With the machine's vibrations, some leaves break off and fall onto Mom's head. She sews quickly and the result is a beautiful Irish-knit turtleneck sweater with two turtle necks. No visible seams where two different sweaters came together. She is very talented and I hate her. Okay, I don't hate her but she makes me very angry without me being able to rationally explain why. Yesterday, I constructed an elaborate Cinderella fantasy where my father, a man I no longer remember, was driven off by my evil and shrewish mother. I suppose it's the only desertion scenario that doesn't hurt me.

I offer Jeanne some of my food but she is fasting. Now I feel guilty. I struggle to finish what's on my plate. I think about Jeffrey insisting that I ask Mom where my father is, or better yet, how come he doesn't see me if he really lives in the same town as us, but I know tonight is not the night for that conversation.

Mom says, "Try the sweater on, sweetie. Make sure it fits."

I pull the scratchy wool over our heads. Jeanne doesn't like it.

Mom tugs at the shoulders, waist, and sleeves, inspecting her work. She says, "This fits nice. Very nice. You look great." Mom is still at least six inches taller than me. I don't know if I'll ever catch

up. Mom folds her arms over her thin chest, her defense and attack posture. Big smile, quite satisfied with herself, with what she's done for her daughter. It's a very intimidating look. One I don't know how to overcome.

She says, "Homework time. I'll check your answers when you're done."

I leave the kitchen with a full belly and empty of fight. As I walk into the living room and past the snarling fireplace, Jeanne closes her eyes and says, "Allez!" which means *go!* I already feel bad about the food so I hurry away from the fire, but I trip and fall, my hands scraping on the brick landing in front of the fireplace. Jeanne spasms and twitches, trying to remove herself from my body and away from the fire, and I'm crying, but not because of the pain, and somehow this must be all Mom's fault too.

"Sorry!" I get up and dash up the stairs to my bedroom. My hands sting and I look at them. The palms are all scraped up and bloody.

Jeanne says, "It's only stigmata. But keep it secret. Go wash it off and don't tell your mother."

At least, that's what I think she says. My French is a little rusty.

Mr Bob was my science teacher when I went to school. I don't miss school and the taunts and the stares and how incredibly lonely I could be in a lunchroom full of other people. Nor do I miss Mr Bob, even though he's always been nice to me.

Mom and I are standing next to the swing set, watching Mr Bob. Odd and misshapen tools that couldn't possibly fix anything fill Mr Bob's fists and spill out of his tight, too short, and paint-stained overalls.

My mother says, "Can you fix this?"

Mr Bob says, "No sweat."

My other head is Marie Curie, child-aged, so no one recognizes her. She's very plain and I find that beautiful. Marie says something in Russian that sounds vaguely commiserative. Mom ignores this head.

Unprompted, Mr Bob launches into an explanation of how the swing set works. Maybe he does know that I have young Madame Curie with me and he's trying to impress her. If so, that's really creepy.

Mr Bob says, "This swing set is one big friction machine. Mounted on the horizontal bar above is an axle with ten circular plates, each plate turning and rubbing against pads when you swing. As the pads and glass rub against each other, they make an electrical charge. The prime conductors, in this case, long brass pipes, follow the frame of your swing set. The ends of these conductors carry metallic combs with points bent toward the faces of the glass plates. The combs collect the charge, and the pipes bring the charge to the collector/generator and then to your house. Really it's very simple, but not very efficient."

Mom says, "Nothing Veronica's father did was very efficient."

I want to tell Marie Curie the obvious: that my father made this swing set, but he isn't here anymore and I don't know where he is but supposedly he's still in town, somewhere. But I don't think Marie has learned English yet. The next time I go to the bookstore, I'll get her biography, and maybe some books on electricity and friction machines so I can fix this without any help.

Mr Bob climbs a ladder to get at the axle. Tools drip and drop like a lazy rain. As much as I'd like the swing to be tuned up so it'll be more efficient, I don't want Mr Bob touching any of it. The swing is my only connection to my father and I'm afraid Mr Bob will ruin everything. Wanting to be random and unpredictable, but knowing different, I blurt out, "Where's my father?"

Mom folds her arms across her chest and says, "Why don't you go inside and wash up. Don't forget you're hosting the book club tonight and you haven't prepared any of the hors d'oeuvres."

I stare at Mom and I want to cry. Marie stares at Mr Bob and clucks her tongue at his apparent incompetence. Marie says something in Russian that I think would translate as: I'd like to see this contraption's schematic, you talentless monkey.

Mom softens, and bends to whisper in my ear. She says, "We can talk about this later if you really want to. If you need to. But it's for the best, Veronica. Really. Go on, now. Set up for your book club."

My book club is here. Six women, ages ranging from Peg Dower's somehow rheumy thirty-six to Cleo Stanton-Meyer's health-club fifty-three. Our chairs and bodies make a circle, a book club Stonehenge, but with an end-table loaded with coffee, tea, water, chips and spinach dip, and biscotti at the center. Everyone has their dog-eared copy of *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf on their slack-clad laps.

Mom stays in the kitchen and doesn't participate in the discussions even though she reads all the books. She insists this is my *thing*. I hear the sewing machine turn on and off sporadically.

Bev Bentley, white-blonde and DD chest (Mom is so jealous), says, "Excuse me, but is that her, Veronica? Will we be able ask her questions?" Hands cover faces all over the circle. Peg and Cleo groan much like a crowd at a sporting event when something bad happens. Bev is the something bad happening. She asks me the same question every meeting. And every meeting I answer: "Sorry, Bev, she's not the author of this book." It is rather insulting for her to continually think that my other head is that simple or predictable. But I don't tell them my other head is Sylvia Plath. They should be able to figure that out on their own. Sylvia just smirks and takes it all in, burning Bev down with a look that could shame an entire culture.

Our discussion begins with Peg trying to compare Clarissa Dalloway to Catherine from *Wuthering Heights* but no one agrees with her. Sylvia laughs but it sounds sad. I redirect the discussion to the book's themes of insanity and suicide and reality and the critique of the social system. None of us say anything that's new or important, but it is still satisfying to discuss something that matters to us. Cleo wonders aloud how autobiographical this novel was for Woolf, and I wonder how hard Sylvia is biting her tongue or maybe she just doesn't care enough to join in. I'll need to keep me and her out of the kitchen and away from the oven.

Then book talk is over before everyone's tea cups and coffee mugs are empty. And as usual, our talk deteriorates into town gossip.

"Darla has been sleeping with that new pharmacist."

"William Boyle?"

"He's the one."

"He must be ten years younger than Darla."

"Fifteen."

"And her divorce isn't even final yet."

They move on to discuss the high school gym teacher and his secret gay lover. As best as I can figure, this mysterious lover is more abstract ideal than reality. Sylvia is still disinterested. She's flipping through my copy of *Mrs Dalloway* and doodling in the margins. And there's more of the who's-sleeping-with-who talk followed up with who's-not-sleeping-with-who talk, which includes Cleo's third husband's erectile dysfunction diagnosis and her daily countdown until he fills one of those blue pill prescriptions, likely to be handed out by the philandering pharmacist.

The sewing machine in the kitchen is quiet and has been for a

while. Mom stopped sewing once the book discussion ended. I know Mom thinks this book-club-cum-gossip-session is a substitute for all the wonderful teenage conversations I don't have with other teenagers. I don't know if it is or not since I'm not having those teenage conversations with other teenagers. I generally don't mind the town dish as I do find it entertaining. But tonight it seems wrong, especially on the heels of Woolf's book. I mean, this was what she was railing against.

So, inspired by Virginia to say something meaningful, or at the very least to yank everyone out of complacency, I say, "Does anyone know where my father lives?"

In the kitchen, the sewing machine roars to life, stitching its angry stitches. Sylvia whispers, "Atta girl," into my ear. I look out into the newly silent Stonehenge of women. All of them here, all of them totems in my living room only because my mother asked them to be here. I love Mom and I hate her for the book club; not either-or but both at the same time.

The women, they shrug or shake their heads or say a weak *no*. Then they fill their plates with chips and biscotti. I know it's not fair to make them uncomfortable, but why should I always be the only one?

Our discussion slowly turns toward TV shows and movies, and then what book should we read next. Peg finds the book I didn't want to buy sitting unread on the fireplace mantel. She passes it around. Everyone claims to have heard about this book that no one has heard about. They mumble agreeable sentiments about it being challenging, something new, having buzz, and they decide, without asking me and before the book makes it way around the circle back to me, to make it our next book club selection. Sylvia thumbs through it and doesn't say anything.

Mom reappears from the kitchen with everyone's coat in her arms. Polite, light-pat-on-the-back hugs are passed back and forth, even when I insist upon handshakes, and then everyone leaves. I'm left with Sylvia, no answers to my father question, a mother pouting and sewing in the kitchen, loads of dishes and cups and trays to wash, and a book in my hands that I don't want to read.

I am up and out of the house before Mom wakes up. We haven't said anything to each other since the book club. Getting up and eating breakfast alone quickly becomes an hour on the swing set. It's cold and there's no way of knowing if Mr Bob's tune-up did any good. The swing doesn't seem any different, or more efficient.

I really don't want to do this today. It's not helping that my other head is changing by the downswing, almost too many heads to keep up with. There's been Cleopatra, Bonnie Parker, Marsha Brady, Fay Wray, Emily Brontë, Cindy Lou Who, Janis Joplin, and even that vacuous snot Joan Rivers.

My heads never change this fast, and I hate it. I really wanted nothing more than to sit out here and talk with one of the heads, have someone help me decide what to do, or what to think. I don't know why finding my father is all of a sudden so important to me. Last week and pretty much all the weeks before that week, he was never more than a fleeting thought, a forgotten dream.

The swing coupled with my changing heads is making me dizzy, so I put my legs down, scraping my sneakers on the sand, digging an even deeper rut, and I stop swinging. Then I go and sit up against the neighbor's wooden fence with my head in my hands, trying to regain some level of equilibrium. Joan Rivers is yammering in my ear about my terrible clothes and iffy skin. The leaves I'm sitting on are cold and wet. I get up and walk.

I walk downtown to the cobblestones and the Little Red Book-

store and Joan Rivers becomes Lauren Bacall becomes Calpurnia becomes Scout becomes Boo Radley's mother, which is confusing. I stand outside with my hands cupped on the bookstore's bay window. The place is empty and I'd have the shelves to myself but I keep walking, past the Little Red Grocery and Little Red Hardware and the Little Red Candy Shoppe and the Little Red Bank, and out of the downtown area and through the town square, and Boo Radley's mother becomes Lucille Ball becomes Karen Silkwood becomes Mary Shelley becomes Susan Faludi. I walk past the Little Red Library and the Little Red Schoolhouse, which was where I dropped out during my sixth-grade year. Tommy Gallahue showing up to school with a papier-mâché second head was my last day of sixth-grade. Susan Faludi becomes Blanche DuBois becomes Alice in Wonderland. I walk past the town high school and I walk past without any regrets. Alice becomes Rosa Parks becomes Vivien Leigh. I walk through residential neighborhoods, peeking over fences and into yards randomly, looking for the man I don't remember, looking for the man I know I'll never find. Vivien Leigh becomes a starving Ethiopian girl that I don't know but have seen on commercials becomes Zelda becomes Flannery O'Connor. I don't have a watch but it must be noon as the sun is directly over my heads and I'm very hungry, so I start walking back home, taking a different route back, staying in the small neighborhoods, still looking through fences and even inside a few mailboxes for what? I'm not sure. And Flannery O'Connor becomes Oprah becomes Nancy Drew becomes Maya Angelou becomes Shirley Temple becomes Eponine becomes little orphan Annie becomes Amelia Earhart and I'm home.

My mother is on the swing. She's actually sitting on the swing that apparently is not calibrated to precisely my weight. But she's not really swinging. She's sitting, her legs folded under, her toes tickling the rut in the sand, her face in her hands, and I can't be sure, but I think she's crying. She's wearing an Irish-knit turtleneck sweater like mine, but with only one turtle neck. Amelia Earhart becomes Shirley Jackson becomes Hester Prynne. I'm hiding where Jeffrey usually hides, in the thinning shrubbery next to our neighbor's fence. Then Jeffrey runs out of his house, across the street and to my mother. No one has seen me yet. Jeffrey is talking with her. I guess, for him, it doesn't matter who is swinging. I won't hold it against him. He's only five. I wonder if he asks her the same questions he asks me. Mom laughs then scoops up Jeffrey into her lap and they swing together. Hester Prynne becomes the witch accusing Abigail, and I'm angry-jealous, or jealous-angry, and maybe they're the same emotion, each just wearing something a little different. I walk out of the bushes and to the swing. Abigail doesn't say anything but just points with my left index finger.

Jeffrey says, "Hi, Veronica!" between giggles.

"Hi."

Mom stops the swing. She says, "Jeffrey, you can swing by yourself, as long as you promise not to go too high. Promise?" If she was crying before, there is no sign of it now.

Jeffrey puffs out his chest, "I promise."

I want to ask how Jeffrey is going to manage this with his withered arm. But he hops right on the swing, tucks the left chain of the swing under his armpit, grabs the other chain with his good arm and starts pumping. We watch him swing for a few minutes and Abigail has become someone else but I haven't bothered to look and see who it is.

Mom says, "We'll be right back, Jeffrey. I need to talk to Veronica for a bit. Keep pumping, kid." She puts a hand on my shoulder and guides me to the house. After a few paces, she says, "What?" like

I've been staring at her expectantly, but I haven't. Then she says, "I need someone on that swing today. I need the juice to vacuum the floors later."

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We're in the kitchen. I sit down. Mom stands and paces. She doesn't wait for me to say anything and starts right in with a simple declarative.

"You and I came home early one afternoon and I found more than the expected amount of heads in my bedroom."

I say, "How old was I?"

"One."

My other head is Mom. Mom when she was my age. Despite her pigtails, she manages older-Mom's fierce, intimidating look. I don't know what she's thinking, and I'm tired of trying to figure out who's thinking what.

I ask, "Who was he with?"

"Does it matter?" Mom doesn't waver, doesn't get all choked up or anything like that, not that I expected her to.

"I don't know if it matters, Mom. That's why I'm asking."

"The woman was the middle school science teacher that Mr Bob replaced. She doesn't live in town anymore."

I imagine a woman who looks like Mr Bob. She wears baggy clothes that have chemical stains and Bunsen burner singe marks. She has short, straight hair, mousey brown, wears thick glasses, and no make up. Pretty in a smart way, maybe. I imagine Mom finding her in the bedroom with my father, who I can't describe in such physical detail, no matter how hard I try to conjure him.

Young-Mom doesn't say anything but just stares at her older self. Is this look of hers studied observation or soul-deep sadness?

"Did he leave after you caught him?"

"The very next morning."

"Did you tell him he had to leave?"

"No."

Young-Mom says, "Do you really need to know any more of this?" which I don't think is a very fair question. And it's not fair to be double-teamed by Mom like this, even though I know that I can't always blame everything on Mom. I fight the urge to tell the Young-Mom to shut up.

I say, "That's terrible. I'm sorry that happened, Mom. I really am."

"Thank you." Mom says it like she's accepting a throwaway compliment about her shoes. Young-Mom pouts. They are both so intimidating but I stand up and stutter-walk to Mom and give her a hug. She doesn't uncross her arms off her chest so the hug isn't soft and comfortable. I make contact mostly with the angles of her bones and the points of her elbows and the sweater wool scratches my face, but Mom does kiss the top of my head, twice. That's something, maybe even enough.

"Thanks again, sweetie."

I break the one-sided hug and say, "What did he look like?"

"You."

"Can I ask where he lives?"

Young-Mom sighs and shakes her head. Her pigtails tickle my neck, feeling eerily similar to Medusa's snakes, but I don't mind them as much.

"I thought I was ready to tell you, Veronica. But I'm not."

I want to ask if she knows who my other head is. I want to ask if she knows what it means. I want to ask if she knows that most days I dream about becoming her.

She continues, "It's not you anymore. I know you can handle it now. But you'll just have to give me more time." Mom uncrosses her arms and looks around the kitchen, at the cluttered counter and the

sewing machine, looking for something to do.

Young-Mom turns, whispers directly into my ear, "Are you happy now?"

I unroll the neck of the sweater and pull it up over her mouth and nose. She doesn't stop me or say anything else.

I say, "Okay, Mom," but I don't know if it is okay and I don't know if I feel guilty or satisfied or sad or angry or scared. What I'm feeling no one has bothered to name or classify or dissect, or maybe this feeling has already been outed by somebody else and I just haven't stumbled across it and that seems likely but at the same time it doesn't, and then I think about all the books in my bedroom and the giant stacks of books in my Little Red Bookstore and I wonder if it is there or here or anywhere else other than inside me.

Mom says, "Alright, back to work then." She claps her hands and I feel my other head change but I won't look to see who it is yet. "Could you go and take over for Jeffrey on the swing? He's making me nervous. I appreciate it, honey. And don't forget about your big tests later."

It's windy and cold. The temperature dropping by the minute. Jeffrey stops swinging, but stays on the seat. "Do I have to stop now?"

"Yes, my mother wants me to take over."

He doesn't argue, but he hasn't moved off the seat either. He releases the swing chain that was tucked under his armpit. "You and your Mom had a talk?"

"Yes, Jeffrey." I notice I'm standing in my Mom's pose, but I don't change it.

"Did you ask her about your Dad?"

"I did."

"Did she tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Tell you where he is."

"No, not yet."

Jeffrey nods like he understands. Maybe he does. He says, "Maybe you should ask someone else."

"Like who?"

"Me?" He says it like a question, almost like he doesn't know who *me* is.

I play along. Anything to keep me off the swing for another few minutes. "Okay, Jeffrey. Do you know where my father is?"

He nearly shouts, "Yes."

My arms wrap tighter around my chest. This isn't fun anymore. "Then where is he?"

Jeffrey scoots off the swing and points behind him. He points at the neighbor's big wooden fence. "He lives there. Right next door."

That's impossible. Isn't it? Wouldn't I have seen him by now? I think about who lives there and I can't come up with anyone. Is that right? Has he been this close all along and I just haven't noticed, or haven't wanted to notice?

Jeffrey says, "I'm not lying, Veronica. I've seen him."

"I didn't say you were lying."

He says, "I think he's even out in the yard right now. Go and see."

I look at the fence, seven-feet high, completely wrapping around the property. "How?"

"There's a knothole in the fence behind your bushes. You know, I usually hide in your bushes."

I snort, ready to charge. "Okay, Jeffrey, go home please."

He reacts like I hit him, and tears well up.

I soften. "You can come back over later, but I need to do this by myself."

Jeffrey nods, still fighting those tears, then sprints home, this time gripping the empty arm of his sweater. I walk to the bushes, to where Jeffrey hides, the same bushes I hid in earlier. There is a knothole in the fence, the size of a quarter, plenty big to see through. I should've seen this earlier, but I guess I wasn't looking for it.

I remember my second head. The turtle neck is still rolled over her nose and mouth. I roll it down and find Anne again. Only this Anne is older, older than me, even older than the one in her diary. Her skin has sores and is sallow and tight on her face, deepening and widening her already big eyes. Her hair has thinned and I see white scalp in too many places. This Anne doesn't ask any questions. This Anne isn't chatty. This is the Anne that no one dares imagine after reading her diary. I want to help her, take care of her somehow, and I think she senses this, because she points at the knothole with my left hand and nods. Before I look into the hole, I think, selfishly, that this might be the right Anne for the question I've always wanted to ask.

There's a man in the back yard. He's wearing jeans and a moth-worn, olive-green sweater, sleeves pushed up to his elbows. He's raking leaves with his back turned to me. When he stops raking, he walks over to a tire-swing tied to a thick branch of an oak tree. The branch has an axle and generator set-up similar to my swing set, but no one is riding the tire-swing. There are rocks duct-taped to the bottom of the tire. He pushes the tire-swing a few times, to get the pendulum moving, then goes back to raking leaves. This man has two heads.

I wait and watch. He rakes and pushes, but he doesn't turn around so I can see either of his faces. His hair is brown and short on each head, and now I wish I never looked through the hole.

Anne says, "Why has he never contacted you? Why does he hide so close to home? Does he do this so he can see you when he wants? Or is he just being cruel, mocking you, mocking your mother?"

I want to stay crouched in this spot and let leaves and snow gather on me and never stop watching, but I do pull my eye away from the knot. Anne and I scan the length and height of the fence. I don't know the answer to Anne's questions and I know the likelihood is that I may never know.

I decide to ask Anne *the* question. I hope it doesn't seem callous or even cruel to her. I understand how it could be interpreted that way, but I hope she understands me and why I do what I do. I still hope.

I say, "Anne, in your last diary entry, you wrote something that... that I need to ask you about. *This you* in particular. Do you know what I mean by *this you*?"

"Yes."


I say it. "Do you still believe that people are really good at heart?"

Anne sighs and closes her eyes and it's terrible because it makes her look dead. She holds my left hand, the fingers suddenly and dangerously skinny, over her mouth and chin. She's thinking and I know she will give me an answer. But now that I've asked, the answer isn't as important to me as it was a few days ago, or even a few seconds ago. Because no matter what she says, I'll go back to my swing-set and to feeding my house what it needs and I won't tell Mom that I know where he is and I'll take my tests tonight and try my best and help her with the dishes and then talk to her about *Mrs Dalloway* and the women in my book club and maybe even convince Mom to become an official member. Because, maybe foolishly, I still hope.

But I'll sit in the bushes and wait as long as is necessary to hear what Anne has to say. I owe us that much. ✨



THE SHIPS LIKE CLOUDS, RISEN BY THEIR RAIN BY JASON SANFORD ART BY VINCENT CHONG



Mares' tails blew in from the west, clear sign that a big storm was heading our way. As I watched the hundreds of small, wispy ships float silently by on the breeze, I was tempted to keep quiet. After all, I'd warned for years about our town becoming overbuilt, making all of us vulnerable to the flash floods created by big storms. But with memories of the last flood fading, people had ignored me. The mayor even called me a nervous old woman, afraid of my own shadow. It would be just desserts for everyone to be washed away when the big ship's rains hit.

But wishing for revenge is one thing; actually having people hurt over it, quite another. I grabbed my wooden mallet and rang the alarm bell long and hard, taking pride in a moment when my sworn duty actually mattered.

By the time I climbed down from the weather tower, the mayor was waiting impatiently for me. "What is it this time, Tem?" he asked. "Water or shit?"

I smiled in irritation. Despite my continual corrections – the ships dropped a highly refined organic material, not excrement – too many townsfolk called it just that. While they knew how vital the ships were to our world, that didn't stop their agitation when salvation splattered across their houses and streets.

"Water," I said. "But it'll be a big blow, based on the number of mares' tails running from the ship. Maybe as big as that storm fifty years ago." I winced at that memory. My little sister had been killed by those floods, sucked into a vortex which opened right in front of our house.

The mayor glared angrily at the sky. "You sure this isn't another wrong prediction?"

I restrained the urge to throttle this loathsome, worthless man. "I've done my duty and warned the town. It's now up to you."

The mayor cursed, not believing me, but also afraid of what the townsfolk would do if he ignored a valid warning. "People aren't going to like this. The harvest festival started this morning. All the vegetables and fruits are out in the open."

I glanced at the horizon. Already a dark shape – bigger than anything I'd ever seen – grew from the world's curve. "They don't have to like it," I said. "Tell them we have an hour, at most."

The mayor nodded and ran toward the festival, yelling at people to save what they could. Other townsfolk ran to their homes, telling their kids to climb into the highest rooms. Everywhere I looked, people were wide-eyed and scared, rushing about as if the world was about to end.

And perhaps it was. After all, a ship of heaven was about to unleash its floods upon our thrown-together land.

Imagine a mudball, packed tight by little kid hands. The hands continually pack mud onto the ball, but the ball never grows larger. Just endless mud, packing round and round, until you wonder where it all goes.

That's our world.

From the weather histories, I know worlds aren't supposed to be like this. Worlds have solid crusts of metal and rock, and molten cores of fire and heat. Worlds also recycle. They create and destroy, grow and decay. The water you drink was excreted by a woman a

thousand years before. Her body is the dust from which your food grows. Her bones are the clay on which you build your home.

Not our world.

Like new mud pushing down the old, everything sinks to the middle of our world. There are no rivers, no oceans, nothing but land continually created from our rain of organics and other materials. Our skies are always hazy. Up high, one sees a dappled, silver sheen from the small mackerel ships passing at high altitude. Down low, the speckled dots and bulges of larger ships float by, bringing the biggest extremes of weather. All the ships contribute something to our world. Oxygen and carbon dioxide. Metal hail and organic particles. Water as rain, vapor, or ice. Every day our skies are filled with a thousand ships, each one giving something before leaving again for the greater universe.

The first thing we do upon waking is to sweep our houses of the dust which fell overnight. Eventually, though, as the land builds up around us, sweeping isn't enough. So we build our homes higher and higher. Walls ten meters above the walls your grandparents built. A floor which used to be the roof your ancestors slept under.

Up and up, we're always moving up. But we never go any higher.

By the time we'd salvaged what we could of the harvest festival's food, the ship was almost upon us. The ship was a cumulus, towering four kilometers high and stretching across the visible world. From the number of mares' tails I'd seen earlier, I'd figured a cumulus would be chasing them, but I'd never seen one this big. It moved slowly through the atmosphere, the massive curve and sweep of its bow funneling the air into cloudy turbulence. Dark rains poured from the ship's belly, turning the horizon black except for the occasional burst of lightning.

When I reached home my apprentice, Cres, was already at work, carrying books and weather logs to the top floors. I was glad she'd heard the bell. This morning Cres had headed to the ravines south of town to check on the erosion gauges. Passing rains continually wore new gullies and ravines in our world's loose soil. Unfortunately, loose soils also made being caught in the open during a big storm extremely dangerous – flash floods would literally wash everything away.

"Master Tem," Cres said when she saw me, "I've discovered a new phenomenon. Come and see."

Cres sounded excited by the coming storm, as I guessed I'd have been when I was fourteen. I tossed the food I'd lugged home in our kitchen, then followed her up the weather tower.

The tower, the tallest structure in town, swayed ominously to the wind. I glanced around the town and saw that almost everyone had finished closing up their homes. The only person still out was Les the tailor, who hastily hammered a support beam against one wall of his house. For the last two years I'd been after Les to fix his house, telling him it would never survive a big storm. I shook my head and looked toward the oncoming ship.

"What did you see?" I yelled at Cres over the building wind.

"The cumulus dropped some kind of lighted sphere."

"Most likely lightning. You aren't old enough to remember, but big ships generate massive charge differentials between themselves and the ground."

Cres rolled her eyes. "I've read about lightning in the histories," she shouted back. "This was different. Pay attention and see."

I resisted the urge to slap her for being cheeky with her master. She acted like I had at that age, totally absorbed in dreams about ships, distant planets, and dimensions beyond belief. Her parents had apprenticed Cres to me because they knew her imagination

marked her as someone with the potential for being taken by a passing ship. But I wasn't sure that what saved me – the burden of weather predicting I'd taken on after my sister's death – would also work for her.

I looked back at the cumulus, wondering about both the ship and the people inside. Why did cumulus ships always pursue the much smaller mares' tails? Why did the people inside occasionally pound us with dangerous storms? The histories described the weather patterns on old Earth – the clouds and rains which recycled that world's water – and how early humans believed gods and demons created their planet's storms. Despite my years of study, it pained me to admit that I was little better than those ancient humans. The ships might as well be gods or demons for all I knew about them.

My thoughts were interrupted as a single ball of light fell from the ship. It hurtled through the dark skies and exploded into the ground two kilometers from us, sending up a mushroom explosion of dirt.

I grabbed the telescope and tried to make out what the light was, but the rain already splattered around us and the wind swayed the tower too much to focus on the impact site.

"We have to get below," I yelled. "The tower isn't safe in a storm this big."

Cres, though, ignored me as she plotted the impact through the rangefinder. She wrote something down on the rain-splattered weather log and shoved the paper under my nose. "That's the third impact I've seen," she said. "They're all in a straight line."

Before I could ask where the line was leading, another ball of light shot from the ship and hit just outside town. The impacts were walking themselves right toward us. Not needing to see more, I rang the warning bell again – for all the good it would do – then grabbed Cres and pulled her down the ladder. We bolted into the house's safe room, but when I tried to shut the door the wind blew so strong the locking bar wouldn't catch. I yelled for Cres to get under a desk as I tried to force the door shut.

The last thing I remembered was a loud whining, followed by an explosion of dirt and rain which threw me into blackness.

I woke to dried blood caking my face and dried mud stiff on my clothes. I lay on my cot in my bedroom, the sun shining through shattered windows. As I sat up, I saw that my room was a shambles. Even though this was the second story, the flood waters had reached this high. Water and muck coated the floor. As I stood up, I plucked several of my sketches from the mud. One, a detailed look at the high altitude mackerel ships which were hard to see even with the best telescopes, had been a particular favorite of mine. I dropped it back in the mud and walked outside.

In my sixty years of life, I had never seen the town so hard hit. Of the five hundred homes and buildings in town, at least a hundred were damaged. In addition, there were gaps along the streets where houses had once stood. I wasn't surprised to see that Les the tailor's house was gone. His house had needed repairs for so long that everyone knew it wouldn't stand up to a strong blow. I muttered a silent prayer that he'd died quickly, and wasn't lying entombed in some runoff tunnel dozens of meters beneath our feet.

What shocked me most, though, was the number of strong homes that had also disappeared. During big storms, flood waters usually raced straight through our town before washing into the drainage tunnels which continually opened and closed in the loose soil. This time the ripples left in the mud suggested the waters had swirled about in unusual circular patterns.

I discovered why when I walked two blocks south of my house. A

number of buildings there were gone, replaced by a large sink hole fifty meters across. Cres and the mayor stood next to the hole with a group of townsfolk. I walked over to join them.

The mayor was thrilled to see me. "Glad to see you up and about," he said, hugging me, an embrace I grimaced through. "I was worried our hero wouldn't get to tell me what the hell happened here."

I nodded, embarrassed at the mayor's calling me a hero. Several other townsfolk also thanked me, grateful for the warning I'd been able to give.

Once Cres had a moment, she filled me in. The explosion that knocked me unconscious came from one of the balls of light, which crashed into town and created the hole before us. Cres assumed the hole had breached some cavern or tunnel under the town because the flood waters had swirled down the hole as if into a drain. The waters had also carried about forty houses away, along with over a hundred people. But as the mayor kept telling me, it would have been far worse without my warning.

"What do you think's down there?" Cres asked, trying to get close to the crumbling edge without falling in. Already the hole was collapsing. Within a few days, nothing would be left in the loose soil but a large depression.

"We'll never know because it's forbidden," I said, eying the mayor, who nodded in agreement as I reminded Cres of the only absolute law on our world. "Anytime people try to dig underground or explore sinkholes like this, ships come and kill them. Come, we need to salvage what we can from our house."

Cres didn't seem convinced by my words, but she followed me back home without argument as she stared with longing at the ships passing in the sky.

The next two months were tough, but the town pulled through. Most of the crops stored at the harvest festival had been destroyed, along with many of the chickens and pigs, and none of us had much food to fill our bellies. But crops grew fast here. They had to – anything which grew too slowly would be buried by the continual rain of organics and other materials. Soon the wheat and rice were ready to harvest, the vegetables were ripe, and the fruit was only weeks from being picked.

As I'd predicted, the sinkhole quickly collapsed under the weight of the loose soil. Several townsfolk petitioned the mayor to allow new houses to be built near there, or at least a memorial park. However, I advised against both options. The ground could still collapse if another storm blew through. Because of my hero status, the mayor actually agreed with me.

In more mundane matters, Cres couldn't keep her head out of the sky. While this was usually a good trait in a weatherman, she blew off all her studies, only doing just enough work to keep me from yelling at her.

So it was that one fine, hazy day, I found her daydreaming in the weather tower instead of recording the passing ships in the log. When she saw me, she jumped off her stool, knocking the log from the railing. I barely caught the book before it fell six stories to the ground below.

"Master Tem, I'm so sorry," she began to stammer.

I waved for her to be quiet. "What deep thoughts are you pondering?" I asked.

Cres looked at me like this was a trick question and she'd be smacked for a wrong answer. "The ships," she said with hesitation.

I nodded. "When I was your age, I spent all my free time watching ships pass in the sky and praying that I was special enough to attract their attention. I didn't care what ship it was. Massive universe

jumper. Slim star hopper. Dimension slider. I wanted to leave this mudball of a world and see the universe."

From the way Cres nodded, I knew I spoke for her own feelings.

"There's nothing for us here," she said. "I mean, humans are exploring the universe, all the universes, and we're stuck in a pre-industrial cesspool. It's not right."

I sighed because Cres was saying the very things I'd said at her age. Above us, a large ship, of a style I'd never seen before, puffed lazily across the sky while a gentle drizzle of rain fell from its body. I knew that Cres wouldn't be staying here much longer. She had so much potential. All that had saved me was my sister's death. I'd been so determined that no one else die like my sister that the ships avoided me. Cres, though, wasn't determined to stay. Eventually one of the countless ships passing by would descend and take her, leaving our world for sights I couldn't begin to conceive.

Still, I owed it to Cres's parents to at least try and keep her here.

"Give me a month," I said. "There are things I want to teach you about our world. If after that you still want to leave, I'll give you my blessing."

Cres hugged me and muttered her thanks, no doubt knowing – just as I knew – that nothing I could teach her would keep her here.

Over the next few weeks, Cres and I traveled by horse around the countryside, visiting several towns with decent libraries. I showed her numerous histories of our world, including restricted volumes speculating on how our world stayed the same size despite the constant mass being added, and why everything continually sank toward the world's core. I also showed her ten thousand years' worth of observations about the ships which continually visited our planet and kept us alive with their offerings.

In one library, I pulled out a worn leather tome detailing three ship crashes over the last few millennia. In each case, our people had rescued humans from the downed ships. While strange differences had been noted – alterations to the head, bizarre tints and glows around their bodies – they had been able to speak with us. One account even briefly described the interior of a ship, which had been merely empty space. That account also swore that the crash's two survivors had somehow formed out of the ship's very skin. Unfortunately, all of these accounts were frustratingly vague and sparse. In each case, rescuing ships had quickly arrived and taken away the survivors.

"See," Cres said as we rode back to our town. "They're keeping us in the dark. Anyone who knows anything is removed from our world."

"Only one way to find out," I said, nodding at several large hoppers passing above us dropping large, wet drops of fermented material from their bellies. "Unfortunately, once you go that route you can never come back."

As we rode our horse over the speckled green and brown hills and through the thin, straggly forests, I tried to explain to Cres that we had a duty to each other. No matter how much technology the rest of humanity possessed, we were all human. Unless one worked for each other, there was nothing worth living for. Just as the trees and grass around us only survived by growing to the sky faster than they were buried, so too did we survive because we helped each other.

However, my heart wasn't in my words. I thought of my little sister, Llin, who'd died when she was six. We'd played endless ship games – imagining the worlds we'd visit; searching the sky for the ship we'd eventually travel on. Our mom should have punished us

for saying such things, but she'd merely nodded and pointed out her own favorite ships when they passed by.

But Llin died before she could find her ship. We'd been walking home from the park – where we'd spent the morning throwing folded paper ships into the wind – when a massive cumulus passed over the town, sending floods raging through the streets. As the waters tore at our bodies, I'd grabbed Llin's hand and struggled to hold her above the current. She screamed and cried, begged me to hold on, but the flood snatched her away.

My mother had held me all that night, telling me I'd done the best I could and that Llin would still find her ship. But I no longer cared about the ships. If the people who flew the damn things could so easily kill my little sister, I'd never join them.

As if knowing my desire, the ships left me alone.

The next morning, Cres was gone. At first I assumed she'd gone to market, or to check our instruments. But when she missed dinner, then supper, my gut climbed to my throat. I stopped by her parents' house and discreetly inquired about her, but they hadn't seen her. She also hadn't spoken to them in days, but if she was going to try and attract a ship I strongly doubted she'd tell her parents.

When Cres didn't return that night, I knew she was gone. I prayed she'd found a good ship and was enjoying her life.

The next morning I was cooking breakfast when I realized the jar of strawberry preserves was empty. I walked into the root cellar to get a new jar, only to be confronted by loud curses. In the cellar's far corner, I found a large hole in the wooden floor.

"About time you heard me," Cres said from the hole. "I've been yelling since yesterday."

I quickly lowered a rope and Cres climbed out. She then explained that she'd gone into the root cellar for supplies and fell through the floor. Evidently the storm several months ago had washed away a lot of the ground under the house.

I was extremely irritated, imagining the house I'd built upon my mother's house, and her mother's before that, in danger of collapse. Cres, though, was ecstatic. "You don't understand," she said. "The water didn't just wash the ground away. It exposed a number of underground tunnels. And there's a faint glow coming from somewhere down there."

I started to remind Cres that it was forbidden to explore underground; that if the ships didn't kill us, the mayor definitely would. Tunnels on our loose-soil world were also dangerous because of the potential for the loose soil to collapse. But as I stared into Cres's excited eyes, I realized that if I said no to exploring beneath the house she would probably give up any remaining desire to stay on our world. Once that happened, she would be gone on the first interested ship.

I sighed and grabbed a jar of strawberry preserves. If I was going to risk my neck, it would at least be on a full stomach.

The red glow Cres had seen came from a ship. Gleaming like new and wedged in the old foundations of my house thirty meters below the ground.

The ship appeared to be a dimension slider, although that was merely a name from a book and didn't tell much about what it could actually do. To get to the ship, Cres and I climbed and dug through the ruins of my ancestors' houses. Ancient rooms half filled with dirt; walls ruptured and split by pressure and water. Even though it was nerve-racking seeing how much of my house's foundation had washed away in the recent flood, it was also fascinating to climb through my family's history. My grandmother had often talked

about the bright red kitchen of her childhood and sure enough, the walls of that room two levels down still showed a faint red ocher beneath the dirt and grime. Four levels down, I ran my fingers along a cracked ceramic oven and wondered about the meals my ancestors had cooked here.

But the ship was the centerpiece of the ruins. A perfect sphere ten meters across, with the lowest timbers of my house merging into the ship's skin as if they'd always been one.

"How old is this ship?" Cres asked.

I calculated how many levels of the house reached down to this point. "Maybe three hundred years. Give or take a generation or two."

Cres shook her head. "That can't be right. The history of the town goes back a thousand years. There's no record of a ship crashing here."

That was indeed a puzzle.

Over the next week we cleared away more dirt and debris around the ship. To make our work easier, I built a simple pulley system to lower ourselves into the hole. We also took care to only work on days when the passing ships indicated good weather, and only after locking the front door against visitors. After all, if the mayor or town constables discovered that we were exploring an underground ship, not even my hero status would save us from a quick drop and a sudden stop.

One strange thing we discovered was that the waters which had surged through my house's foundation appeared to have drained into the ship, with the runoff tunnels radiating out from the ship like spokes on a wheel. Cres and I debated whether the ship had somehow called the water to itself.

When Cres and I weren't clearing around the ship, we attended to our regular duties. We also explored my volumes of weather history.

"The histories are wrong," Cres said one morning when I climbed up the weather tower to check on her. In her lap sat my oldest volume of histories, dating back a millennium to the town's first weatherman. "This volume says your family has been building up this house for nine hundred years. But there's no way the ship has been around that long."

I sighed, knowing Cres was right, but also not having an answer. As we'd cleared away the dirt from the ship, we hadn't found any evidence of older houses under it. The ship appeared to support my entire house. "Maybe my ancestors' houses disappeared into the ship like the water did?"

Cres considered this for a moment, then discounted it with a snort. "That would mean there's a ship supporting every house in town. I find that hard to believe."

While I was glad that Cres had given up thoughts of leaving our world – even if the reason she wanted to stay was putting us at risk of death – I refused to let her disrespect me. I closed the history book and told her to keep an eye out for bad weather.

The next day the weather changed and, much to Cres's irritation, we had no time for the ship. Mares' tails began to blow in from the west, always followed by the cumulus ships which endlessly chased them. While none of these ships were anywhere near as large as the cumulus which damaged our town earlier in the year, they were still big enough to issue warnings. Because of the danger to the town, either Cres or myself stayed in the tower at all times. While Cres hated to be torn from her examinations of the ship – she was frustrated that we still hadn't found a way inside – she understood

our duty. In addition, the runoff from the storms now ran through the underground tunnels beneath my house. Being caught down there during a downpour would mean certain death.

A few days into the storm cycle I woke around midnight to wind and rain howling outside my window. I grabbed my robe and ran to the top floor, irritated that I'd slept through the warning bell. I could just make out the glow of a large cumulus above the town as it pelted us with rain. This was the biggest storm to hit town since the blow months ago. I opened the roof hatch and tried to climb the tower, but the wind was too strong. I yelled for Cres to stay where she was, then closed the hatch and waited out the storm.

The cumulus passed in ten minutes. I opened the front door to survey the damage and was almost run over by the mayor.

"What happened to the warning?" he yelled. "I was walking back from the pub and nearly got washed away."

I glanced up at the weather tower, which I could now see was empty. I frowned. "The storm wasn't that bad," I said. "Stop complaining." Before the mayor could protest, I slammed the door in his face and ran to the basement. Below the hole I could hear rushing water. Worse, the pulley's ropes descended into the maelstrom. I'd always detached the rope and pulley when we weren't using it so there'd be no evidence we were going underground. That meant Cres had gone down there before the storm hit.

Unable to do anything until the water drained away, I made a cup of tea and tried to relax. But I couldn't stop thinking of all the potential Cres had. I cried for Cres and for myself, the memory of my sister being washed away mixing with the certainty that Cres was dead.

By morning, the water was gone. I lowered myself on the rope and pulley and lit my light stick. The going was slower than before since the path we'd cleared through the old foundations had been washed away.

When I finally reached the bottom level, I found Cres lying beside the ship, which glowed a darker red than I remembered. To my shock, Cres was alive and breathed in labored gasps, which seemed impossible considering how much water had flowed through here. Once again, the wash patterns indicated the water had rushed into the ship. Cres shouldn't have survived.

But any thoughts on Cres's miraculous survival vanished when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned – fearing that the mayor or constables had caught us – and stared with shock into the face of my six-year-old sister. Llin looked as she had fifty years ago, when that massive cumulus sent floods raging through the town.

As if nothing had changed between us, Llin reached out and held my hand. I tried to jerk away, but she held on tight and wouldn't let go.

"I've missed you, Tem," she said.

I nodded, tears falling from my eyes. I wanted to tell Llin how sorry I was for not holding on to her, but she merely smiled and pulled me over to Cres.

"She's not ready," Llin said, leaning over and smoothing Cres's wet hair. Before I could ask what Llin meant, she stood and walked to the ship. But instead of the ship opening for her, Llin's body stretched across the ship itself. Blood gushed out and merged with the ship's red glow. Her skin and muscles and bones flattened and bent and became the ship. The last thing to go was her face, which smiled at me and said "I love you" as her mouth turned into an impossibly long line before finally disappearing.

Panicked, feeling as if my sister had just died a second time, I grabbed Cres's arms and pulled her as fast as I could back up the tunnel.

It took me hours to drag Cres to the top level. I tied the rope around her shoulders and prepared to use the pulley to raise her through the hole. But before I could lift Cres I heard the roar of water rushing through the drainage tunnels. Images of Llin being yanked from my grasp shot through me as new flood waters grabbed Cres's unconscious body. I tried to lift Cres, but I couldn't fight the water and also pull on the rope.

Just as my grip began to slip, I suddenly found myself being pulled into the air. Someone also pulled Cres's half of the rope up. I emerged from the hole and collapsed onto the wooden floor of the root cellar, coughing up water and bile.

Only when I finally stopped gagging did I look into the angry eyes of the mayor and several burly town constables.

.....
The mayor and constables had come to my house when I failed to give a warning about a second storm in a row. I expected them to drag Cres and myself immediately to the town hall, where a drum-head court would sentence us to death for violating our world's only absolute law. Instead, the mayor ordered the constables to carry Cres to her bed. He then summoned a doctor to examine my apprentice.

Once we were alone, the mayor demanded to know what Cres and I were doing underground.

"The water washed away the foundation and the floor collapsed under Cres," I explained, grateful that Cres was still unconscious so she couldn't mess up my lie. "I was trying to save her."

The mayor wasn't a fool. He'd seen the pulley system in the root cellar and knew that wasn't something I'd thrown together for a quick rescue. However, instead of punishing me, he muttered about all the storms hitting the town in recent days and how frightened the townsfolk were. I suddenly realized at this point he couldn't afford to kill his only weatherman. Instead, he warned me not to miss another storm and left the house with the constables.

I walked to Cres's room, where the doctor was still attending to her. Seeing nothing I could do to help, I climbed up the weather tower. The skies appeared settled – the only ships in sight were the high altitude mackerel ships which usually indicated decent weather. That was good, because the town was showing the damage from days of endless storms. Silt rose a meter high along some houses and buildings, while other houses listed at awkward angles, testimony to how water-logged the ground was becoming.

I looked down the street toward the park, where Llin and I had played that fateful day so long ago. While I knew that wasn't the same ground we'd walked on then – the soil having risen five meters in that last fifty years – I tried not to cry as I remembered yet again the feeling of Llin being yanked from my grasp. I also wondered if I'd hallucinated Llin's appearance down below, or if the ship had really brought her back. Either way, the feeling of her hand in mine refused to leave.

By the time I climbed down from the tower, Cres was awake, screaming about ships and the sky and the far side of the universe. The doctor gave her a shot, which relaxed her. Cres stared at me for a moment with a strange smile on her face, then fell asleep.

The doctor asked what had happened to Cres. I told him the same lie I'd given the mayor, but the doctor didn't buy it. He told me to let him know when she woke, then he packed his medical bag and left. I climbed back up the weather tower and wasn't surprised to see that instead of walking back to his clinic, the doctor went straight to the mayor's office.

I had a bad feeling that the reprieve the mayor had just given Cres and I would only last as long as the town's spell of bad weather.

Fortunately for Cres and I, the weather grew increasingly worse over the next three days as increasing numbers of ships passed over our town. Their shadows darkened the sky for hours at a time, their water flooded our streets, and their organics buried us in a continual orange haze. A few of the ships even passed a dozen meters above my watch tower, so low that I should have seen the people inside. However, through the ships' translucent screens I only saw emptiness. I wondered if the ships were reacting to Cres and I disturbing the underground ship, a thought I didn't dare speak out loud.

However, the mayor obviously believed the bad weather resulted from Cres and I going underground. He stopped by several times a day and grilled me about the weather. He didn't like my evasive answers, but was also unwilling to arrest me.

Whenever there was a break in the ships passing overhead, I climbed down from the tower and checked on Cres. She slept most of the time. When she woke, she sometimes screamed and cried about the ship. Other times she laughed. Nothing I said or did would make her tell me what had happened. After a few minutes awake, she'd simply fall back asleep.

Then came the day two massive ships arrived. The first, a flat ship of a style I'd never before seen, spanned half the horizon. It glowed dark blue and dropped shards of ice and metal across the land, smashing a number of roofs in town. The other large ship was a cumulus, and its storm was as bad as the one which rocked our town a few months back. I banged the warning bell for as long as I dared, then jumped for the safety of my house.

Once the floods subsided, I wasn't surprised to find the mayor and two constables at my door. The mayor demanded to inspect the hole in my root cellar. I argued, telling him it was forbidden, but the mayor simply shoved me out of the way. He and his constables waited for the water in the tunnels to subside, then lowered themselves down the hole. The glow from their light sticks faded as they climbed deeper and deeper, heading straight for the ship.

I said a prayer for my sister, hoping the mayor wouldn't hurt her if she appeared to him. I also prayed for myself and Cres. I could face execution without fear, but Cres was so young I didn't know how she'd react.

Hours passed as I waited for the mayor to climb back out and arrest me, but he and his men took their time. Finally, as day turned to night, I decided to climb back up the tower. To my surprise, there were so many ships in the sky that their individual glows merged into one rainbowed mass which rippled and swirled like water flowing across the land. I'd never seen anything like this. Unsure what it meant for the weather, I banged the warning bell. Better safe than sorry.

Once I climbed down, I checked on Cres, but her bed was empty. I ran outside and didn't see her, then looked all over the house. Then I heard the pulley in the basement squeaking. By the time I reached the hole, Cres was gone. I grabbed a light stick and lowered myself down, hoping to stop Cres before the mayor saw her.

Underground, though, everything had changed. Where before the first level had been half collapsed and full of sediment, now this old room was as clean and well-lit as I remembered from my childhood. The stove my mother cooked on glowed warmly, and the table where my sister and I had eaten so many meals looked as fresh as yesterday.

Llin sat at the table, happily folding paper ships as if we were both still kids.

This time I hugged her. She smiled and asked me if I wanted to make some paper ships with her, but I said I had to find Cres.

"I know where she is." Llin grabbed my hand and led me to the stairs leading to the next level.

Each level of the house was a step back in time. We walked through a red walled room from my grandmother's childhood. On an even deeper level, the cracked ceramic oven I'd previously seen was now clean and hot with bread baking inside.

I asked Llin how this had happened and she told me the ship remembered the old houses. "I wanted you to be happy," she said, "so I asked the ship to fix everything up."

Eventually, Llin led me to the lowest foundation, where the ship sat glowing in a dark, red haze. Cres stood before the ship as if in a trance.

"Where are the mayor and the constables?" I asked Llin. She pointed to the ship. At first I thought she meant they were inside, but then I looked closer at the red haze lining the ship and saw blood vessels, and a heart, and skin stretched to the tearing point. I remembered how Llin's body had been torn and flattened and I screamed at Cres to get away from the ship.

But when I tried to grab her, Llin held me back, her grip far stronger than any six-year-old girl's should be. I watched in horror as Cres reached for the ship, her hand stretching out and out until she touched half the ship with impossibly long fingers. She then turned and smiled at me as the rest of her body was pulled in and distorted beyond recognition.

I turned and tried to flee, but Llin kept a firm grip on my hand. "It'll be okay," she said. "You've always wanted to go."

As Llin spoke those words, a loud roar pounded my ears as water rushed down the tunnels. The current pushed me toward the ship, only Llin's grip keeping me from being washed away. As I looked at Llin's face – begging her not to let go – my sister merely smiled. Then, as the water rose over her head, she released my hand and I was washed into the ship.

.....
The stretching didn't hurt. The tearing and rending and twisting of my body into something it was never meant to be was neither pain nor pleasure. I merely became the ship. I was the ship.

I also wasn't alone. Melded into the ship with me were Cres and my little sister, along with the mayor and his men. However, while Cres and Llin hummed with excitement over what was to come, the mayor and his men screamed at me to help them. Not that I actually heard them; instead, their fear and pain screamed directly to my mind. Unable to do anything, and needing to focus on my own situation, I shut them out of my thoughts.

Once my shock at the change ended, I felt around myself. The flood continued to carry water and nutrients into me, feeding the ship and strengthening all of us. As our energy grew, I felt beyond myself, feeling the ships in the air above the town, which called to us like parents urging scared children to come outside and play. As I reached out, I felt other ships under the ground with us, laying dormant here and there, many tied into the foundations of houses, others simply nestling in the dirt. All of them buzzed with life, but lacked the potential to actually leave.

Not our ship. Cres, Llin and I were ready to go. The ship had been ready for decades, ever since my sister had been washed into it. But she hadn't been strong enough to leave on her own. Her last memories, of fear and hope as I'd tried to save her, had trapped her here. She hadn't known where she wanted to go. Or how to leave.

So with Cres assisting me, we began to raise the ship, floating up on a million drops of thought. The ground around us tumbled and collapsed. What had been my home fell in on itself, tearing itself to shreds and rising in a burst of debris and rain as our ship fell into

the sky.

As Cres and my sister learned to control our ship, I watched the town disappear below us. I also felt deep into our world, learning the answer to questions I'd asked ever since my youth. Our world had no core. Instead, it existed as ripples of space-time folded onto themselves, creating the barest film of soap onto which the silt we lived off of continually fell. As the water and organics filtered down, they fed the new ships bubbling up from below, ships needing only someone with potential before they too could take flight. That was why we were forbidden to go underground – doing so could damage the young ships.

As we flew up, I felt the endless ships in the sky greet us. Across the world, ships appeared and disappeared, coming and going to different parts of the universe. And that's when I understood. Our world existed to remind humanity of who we were. Humanity only traveled the universe by first coming here, making sure that a ship's crew always remembered that they were human – no matter what changes they might soon go through. Likewise, when ships returned from elsewhere, they came back here to re-remember who they were. Otherwise, as humans traveled the vast distances and times of the universe, they would die. Without the dreams and hopes and everyday lives of our world's people, all humanity would fall apart.

Some of us still fell apart. I felt the mayor and the two constables, still screaming at the thought of all they could be. They didn't have the potential to survive outside our world. Instead, their bodies, minds, and souls would be torn apart. When our ship one day returned to this world, the dust from their bodies would sprinkle down, helping to feed and create another human who might one day have the potential to understand eternity and survive.

Worse, if they didn't die they'd be so damaged that they could cause great harm to others. The ships which needlessly hurt our world were piloted by damaged people, storming across the world until the other ships stopped them.

I felt Cres and Llin preparing to leave. Both of them focused on a distant galaxy, where new stars and life boiled out of a massive expanse of gas and heat. I felt those distant stars. Imagined the sights and wonders we would see. But even as I imagined us arriving there – and knew that imagining our trip would easily take us there – I heard one final plea from the men trapped with us. I was their last link to sanity. I remembered Llin as she'd held onto my hand. Remembered how I'd sworn never to let someone drown if I could save them.

With the briefest of thought caresses, I said goodbye to Cres and my sister. Cres said she'd take care of Llin. Help her grow into the limitless possibilities which existed before them. I then split myself from the ship, creating a smaller ball of ship which encompassed myself and the screaming men. As we fell toward town, I imagined my old house in all its history and glory, in all it had ever been and could ever be. With an explosion of light and energy, the ship became what I willed it to be.

The mayor and the constables woke in my den, surrounded by my books and furniture and a roaring fire in the ceramic fireplace. The mayor retched upon waking, while the two constables cried and shook. I sat in my new-old favorite chair and sipped a hot cup of tea, trying to overlook the limitations of these men.

Finally, after he'd recovered enough to stand, the mayor ordered the constables to arrest me.

"On what charge?" I asked.

"Violating the ban. You've been underground. In a ship."

I smiled and placed my teacup on the end table. For the briefest

of moments, I removed the reality I'd crafted around them. Showed them our world in all its glory. The mayor and the constables fell to the floor, screaming.

"If you will excuse me, I have work to do," I said. "After all, someone has to see to the weather."

Without another word, the mayor and constables scrambled to their feet and ran out the door.

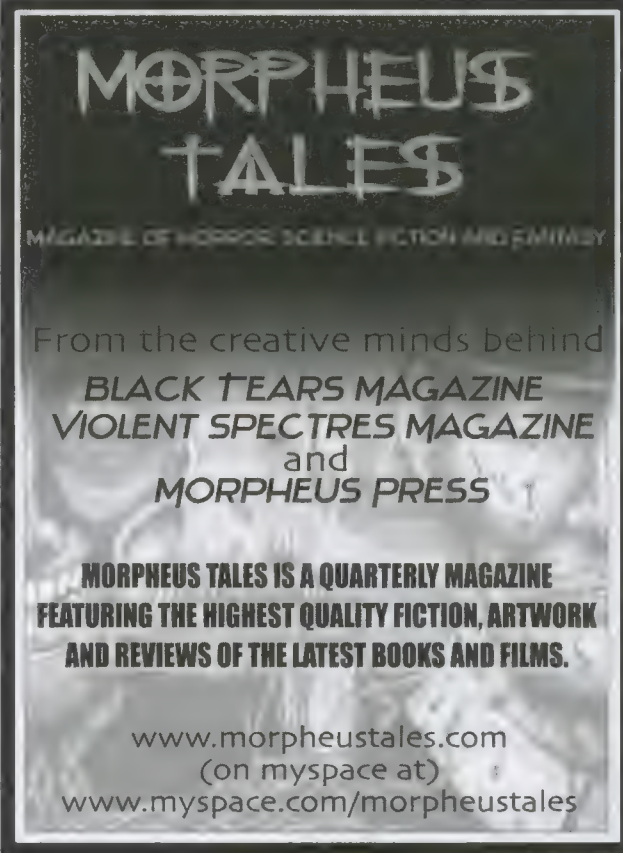
I now know I have the potential to see the universe. I always thought I'd be afraid to give up my life, but that's no longer true.

I still watch the skies. However, instead of predicting the weather, I now simply know it. I caress each ship that passes through our world. I understand the beauties and wonders that ship and people have seen in their travels. In return for this knowledge, I gently remind the ship's people what it means to be human. I speak to them of the most important duty of humanity, which is to care for those around you. I also keep watch over this world's people, seeking out those with the potential to embrace the greater universe and helping them toward that goal.

One day Cres and Llin will return, singing to me of all they've seen. I'll join them on that day and go off to see eternity. Until then, I enjoy the warm water falling from the skies and the dust of other people's dreams. And while I never speak a word of this to anyone, I also know that the ships don't bring the weather to our world.

Instead, we are the weather, and the ships rise off our rain. ☼

Jason Sanford has had stories published in *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *The Mississippi Review* and other places. He has a story forthcoming in *Analog: Science Fiction and Fact*, and another – "When Thorns Are The Tips Of Trees" – in *Interzone*. His website is jasonsanford.com.



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"Rats in the pipes again," Loo said. She stood back from my counter between rows of empty tables. Filthy from ears to ankles, she was a walking bag of smells even from here and I tried not to wrinkle my nose in case it hurt her feelings. "Inspectors coming, 'cause of the bassaders," she continued. "Saw a rat over in the quad stalls, my own eyes. Bigger'n my head."

"Inspectors? Know when?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Tomorrow, day after? Told you what I know."

Inspectors were trouble, but not so bad with warning. It was good info. I reached into the discard bin beneath my counter and pulled out a blister of fake butter, four weeks past its date, and threw it to her. Loo caught it with both hands as if she was swatting down a bug, and gave me a wide grin before she popped the seal with her teeth and sucked at the blister, making happy sounds in the back of her throat. Loo was station-owned like most of the girls here, some orphan that was bought up for a job no one'd do for money. I was born free, but free is a joke anyway – I wasn't any more likely to set foot off of here than Loo was, unless I married or the stand folded and I had to sell myself to cover my debts. I've heard that on Earth and in most of the colonies men and women are equals, but not on Baselle and not on a Basellan-owned station.

Finished, she stuck the empty blister in her pocket. "Thanks, Verah," she said, and shuffled away down the corridor. I leaned my chin in my hands and watched as she got her bottle and brush cart and rolled it back to the door to the utility passages. It was early morning and none of the other vendors on the concourse were out yet, so hopefully no one would complain that she was out of her hole, or worse blame me for it.

I put out the bell in case an early customer came by and I went into my back room, looking to see what I had to clean up before the inspectors came. Not much – I was pretty good most of the time, even when no one was coming to check. Half of the back was the prep room, with a big freezer rats couldn't get into, and counters and shelves of one-use plates and utensils and cups. Beyond that was an alcove where my pull-down bunk was folded up against the wall, and then the heavy door to the back corridor where the big trash went. I had my own bathroom which I kept clean myself; I think that's probably the reason Loo and I get along okay. If I had her job I'd probably hate everybody. Still, Loo's was not the worst job for girls on this station.

I made a note to myself to mop the tile floors after lunch, and to change the oil in the hotcooker at closing. That should be enough; the wienermatic was self-cleaning between cycles.

From the back I heard the lifts. Customers, maybe. I shut up the back room, smoothed down my pink pinstripe apron over my pink miniskirt, checked that my pink hair was tucked up neatly underneath my little pink cap, put on my best concession girl smile, and returned to my counter.

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In the slowdown between breakfast and lunch, three Gnetsians came off the lifts into the concourse. They glowered at everyone around them in their weird fat-browed, squinty-headed way before they walked up to my stand. One of the aliens was dressed in fancy, big black robes covered with little flapping metal discs as if someone had sewn coins all over it. Beside him, his companions were big, muscle-bound, and not very smart-looking. One of them spoke up in broken All, voice squeaky. "What is 'hot dog'?" he demanded.

I picked up my tongs, took a dog out of the cooker, set it in a bun, and held it up for him to see.

"What is made of?"

"Pig," I said. *Mostly pig. Sort of.*

"What is pig?"

I gestured with the tongs at the giant pink ceramic pig that took up fully a quarter of the counter. "That's a pig," I said. As if it looked at all like the frozen bricks of cloned biomatter that showed up in my loading dock bin once a month from Central Distribution.

The Gnetsian picked up the hot dog, sniffed at it, his long scaly nose twitching from side to side. "It is meat, this?"

"Yeh."

He held it out to the guy in the coin-robes, who bent his head over it and took a deep, suspicious sniff. Then he clapped, once. "We take twelve," the Gnetsian with the hot dog said.

"Do you want fries with that?"

"Fries?"

I used the edge of my scoop to isolate one in the hotcooker, held it out to him with the tongs. He tasted it, raised his eyebrows in surprise – I suppose I should've warned him it was really hot – then he swallowed it without even chewing. "Also twelve fries," he said.

I packed up his order and he handed me a credit chit. I ran it, saw it come up on my screen as issued by the Gnetsian Imperial Embassy. *Ah, so that's what Loo meant by 'bassaders'.* I hoped

concession girl

suzanne palmer

illustrated by darren winter



that whatever they were here to negotiate didn't involve either killing or buying people.

For the next four days, the Gnetsian Ambassador and his bodyguards came to my stand to get lunch every day – twelve dogs, twelve fries, each time. Birnie, the balding Basellan man who ran the chicken-stick stand to my left and who resented being less successful than an eighteen-year-old free girl, was nearly fuming from his ears. By the fourth day even Hom and his wife, the nice couple who ran the breaded vegeribbles stand on my other side, were looking a little irritated too.

The aliens had just left, burdened down with trays of food, when Loo crept out of the utility tunnel, looking around for station security before she ran over to my stand. She stopped in front of my counter and held out a grime-covered hand, something dark in her palm. "Verah! Look!"

"What is it?" I asked.

"I find it," she said, keeping her voice low. "It's a gun!"

"What?" I said. "Where did you find it?"

She smiled. "Was looking for rats, find a gun. I see rats now and bzap bzap! Then inspectors don't have to come."

"Can I see?"

Her smile went away and she hid it behind her back. "It's mine," she said.

"I don't want to take it," I said. I really didn't, not after where she must have found it. "I just want to see it."

She stared at me, licking her lips, then nodded. I climbed over the counter, which took practice in a miniskirt. I'd never been this close to Loo before. The smell was overpowering, but what hit me most was how much she looked like a frightened little kid. She held out the gun and I peered at it, carefully not touching it. "I've never seen one like that before," I said.

"You seen guns before?"

"Some," I said, not wanting to say I'd only ever seen them in holo-novels. "You should turn it over to station security."

She shook her head, emphatically *No*.

"Well, if you won't turn it in, you need to keep it hidden and make sure it isn't charged," I said. "If anyone catches you with it, you could get in lots of trouble."

"I can hide it," she said, and it disappeared immediately into the depths of her clothing.

"Seriously, Loo. You could get hurt."

She grinned again. "Bigger'n rats now," she said. "Bzap!"

"Hey!" someone shouted. As I spun around, Loo ran for the utility door. A security guard was walking towards us with a short, angular alien on four spindly legs a few steps behind him. "What was she doing out of the tunnels?" he demanded as the tunnel door closed with a click.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

The alien hissed. "As if vermins, human peoples," it said. I could see myself reflected in its single giant eye, a bunch of pink glints

on deep black, as it glared at me. "I sees the dirty it, in the foods place like vermin."

The security guard also glared at me. I shrugged again. "I had nothing to do with it," I said. Which was mostly true – I didn't ask Loo to come out and show me the gun.

"The Turog Ambassador here is very particular about cleanliness," the guard said. He was my height, not bad looking but built like my pigbrick freezer. "If you see Loo out of her tunnels again, you report it to me immediately."

"Sure," I said. I smiled innocently at the Turog Ambassador, then as gracefully as possible climbed over my counter and back to my own space.

The Turog grimaced. "Dirty vermin food," it said.

"The Gnetsians like it well enough," I said. "They eat here every day. They're very *nice*, too."

The Turog opened a mouth full of blue needle teeth, one row after another back as far as I could see. "They brings vermin foods to the talk table, make us smells it foul all day. Nasty low, make air all burned meats smell. Blame you?"

"Now hold on," I said. "Are you saying it's my fault you don't like what the Gnetsians eat for lunch?"

"I is!" The Turog Ambassador leaned closer.

"Oh, well, all I have to say is..." I paused as if thinking, then stuck out my tongue. "Phbttt!"

I don't know what passes for an insult on Turog-Whatsis World, but I guess that was pretty close. The alien raised its arms up and started screeching. The security guard caught it around the middle, holding it back, and said something I couldn't hear as he shot me murderous looks over the alien's shoulder.

I pulled up my stool and sat, arms folded across my chest, and didn't take my eyes off the Turog as the guard led him away. Stupid, rude aliens. At least I didn't have to clean the bathrooms after them like Loo. Poor kid. Maybe it was just as well she had a gun.

The guard returned about four hours later, just as I was starting to get ready for the early dinner crowds. "Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it," I said.

"The Turog Ambassador wants to apologize for its rudeness."

"What? Really?" I nearly dropped the thawing brick of pigmeat I was holding. I was so surprised.

"Look, the Alliance has been working for years to try to get the Gnetsians and Turog talking, and now that they finally have, it's not going particularly well. Tempers are hot."

I fed the pigbrick carefully into the wienermatic, careful not to chip a nail. "I'm just a concession girl," I said. "Why would it care?"

"It feels it was less than polite," the guard said. "Turog don't apologize often; it's quite generous, especially since you were rude right back to it. You understand?"

"Understand, yes. Care, no," I said. "But you can tell the Turog Ambassador that I accept its apology."

The guard shook his head. "It wants to apologize in person."

I gestured expansively at the concourse, where a handful of late afternoon diners lingered, mostly humans. No aliens in sight. "Then where is it?"

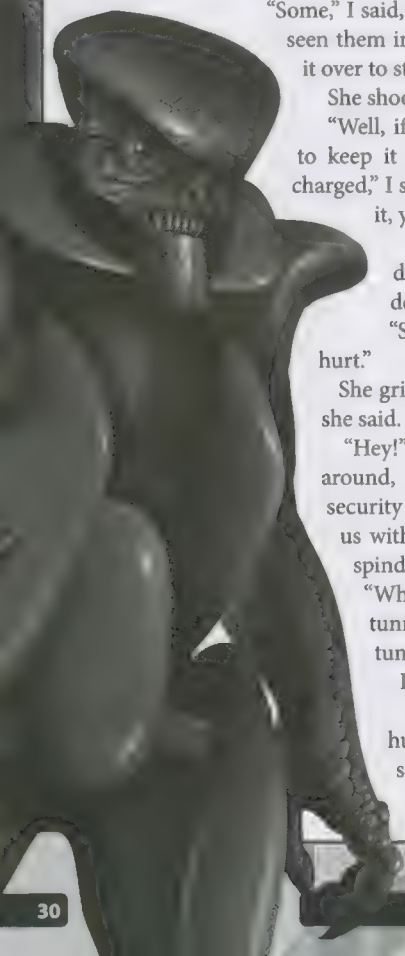
"I'm supposed to bring you up to the Ambassadorial Suites so a formal apology can be made."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I've got the dinner crowd soon."

"You can close."

"But I won't."

"It's not a request. I could have you reassigned, give you a job



down in the pipes with your shit-covered little friend."

"Can't. I'm a free person. And the stand's mine, too."

"Then I can have your space reassigned to down in the automated cargo bay. How long would you last here with no business? And once your stand was gone, what then?"

"What's your name?"

He paused a moment, as if deciding, then said, "Garrit."

"Well, Garrit, you're a fegging assvalve," I said.

"I know. It's my job," he said. "So you're coming?"

"I guess I am." I turned the wienermatic onto timer, went into the back and sealed up the freezer and locked my few valuable things away. Then I brought down the gate over the counter, closing during business hours for the first time since my father died and left me running it on my own three years ago.

Fat-headed Birnie was going to get most of my business tonight, and must have overheard my conversation with Garrit. He practically smirked at me from his stand as we walked past.

Ellan Station was originally built to service rockcrappers living on the edge of the Bounds. Why the Alliance came here to set up a diplomacy shop I didn't know, but the rest of the station was still owned by the original Basellan mining company which is why we have people here who are owned. The Alliance spends so much effort trying to help the aliens, it seems like they should have some to spare for their own kind – but again, maybe it's because we're just girls that they don't.

Garrit led me onto a lift that went up to the top levels of the station. I'd only ever been here once before, as a little kid helping Pa deliver a Super Dog Pack to some shut-in mine manager before the station got changed over.

"Do you think this will take long?" I asked.

Garrit shrugged. "I really don't know."

The lift stopped and the doors slid open on pure luxury. I stared, not able to help myself – it hadn't been like this last time. Thick, fancy golden carpet covered the floors, while sparkling lamps that looked like they were made from a thousand pieces of glass hung up high overhead. Music played from somewhere, something full of violins. I felt more out of place than I ever have in my life. Well-dressed people, some in uniforms, milled around talking to each other, sipping drinks.

The Turog Ambassador was nowhere to be seen. "It'll be along soon, I'm sure," Garrit said.

Time passed. Garrit shifted from foot to foot, glancing at me once in a while, looking at first bored, then annoyed. At last, when nearly an hour had passed, the Turog Ambassador appeared out of a far door and came over. When it was close enough, it tipped its head slightly to me.

"Sorry," it said, then turned and walked away again.

"Uh..." I said, looking at Garrit. "Is that it? You brought me here and made me miss an hour of the dinner rush for *that*?"

Garrit, at least, did me the courtesy of looking embarrassed. "We don't really understand the Turog very well yet," he said.

"Just fegging great," I said. "All that and it didn't even sound sincere!"

"It's hard to know with –"

"Oh, save it!" I said, so mad I actually stamped my foot. "I'm going back to my stand now, if that's okay with you?"

"Sure. I, uh..."

"I'll see myself home," I said, and stomped back into the elevator in my bright pink knee-high boots, clashing hideously with the golden carpet with every step.

I was still muttering as I came out of the lift onto the concourse

and passed fat-headed Birnie. "Verah!" he yelled as I went past, slopping sauce on the counter instead of his customer's chicken-sticks. "Inspectors came by, checked your booth. Hope it was clean for once!"

Fegging wonderful. I reached my stand, noted that the gate had been unlocked, and slammed it upwards angrily. Then I climbed over the counter, checked the wienermatic and the credit slotter, just in case.

Everything looked untouched, except for the big old report that had showed up on my desk in the back room. I turned it on, read through the brief message under the blurry inspector's seal: *no problems found*.

The proximity bell out front chimed and I tossed the report back on my desk for later. Putting on the most pleasant smile I could manage, I went out to deal with what was left of the night's customers.

Late that night, I woke up imagining I could hear distant popping sounds echo through the pipes in the walls, and the screaming of rats.

I stumbled into my shower and let the ice-cold water, carefully rationed to two and a half minutes, trickle over my head and down. It was six in the non-morning, our starless station running on a standard 25-hour clock, and the start of a new day. I opened the wash-n-garb and took out a clean outfit – pink striped, same as yesterday's, same as tomorrow's – and got dressed. Then, as awake as I was going to be until I got some hot coffee in me, I went to my freezer to get out a fresh pigbrick.

My neat rows of frozen meat bricks had been turned into a pyramid pile in the middle of the floor. Frotting useless inspectors shouldn't have even needed to open the freezer, much less move anything around. Cross, I picked up the one at the top of the pile and carried it out front.

I slit the wrapping and was unpeeling the brick when someone walked up to the gate. "Not open for another hour," I said without looking up.

"You'll open for me," the reply came. "I'm the Inspector."

I set the brick down again on the counter with a thunk. "Forget something yesterday? Didn't make enough of a mess?"

"I'm only just getting to your stand now."

"You didn't come inspect my stand yesterday?"

"No."

I leaned through the door into my back room and snagged the report off my desk. I handed it across the counter to the inspector. "Who left this, then?"

He tossed it back at me. "A faked report won't get you off the hook," he said. "Will you let me in, or do I shut you down?"

Nothing else to do, I opened the gate for him. He climbed over, spent a few minutes poking around up front, then disappeared into my back room as I leaned against the counter. Why would someone have broken into my stand, if not to steal something? And why pretend to be the inspector?

I had a thought and looked at the pigbrick sitting half-unwrapped on the counter, the one that had been at the top of the pile and guaranteed to be the first one I grabbed this morning. I picked it up, finished peeling off the translucent, papery wrapping, and held it up to the light. Several tiny pinprick holes appeared like stars. Someone had broken into my freezer and tampered with the meat. And I just bet I knew who – that creepy, no-go Turog Ambassador, trying to wipe out the Gnetsians. Garrit said that the talks were

going badly, but I wondered if he knew how bad.

The Inspector reappeared from the back room, handed me another report, this time a real one. "Looks good," he said. "No sign of rats. Keep it clean and you shouldn't have problems."

"Thank you, Inspector," I said, and watched him climb back over the counter and move on to Birnie. I set the report down and looked at the unwrapped pigbrick. If they'd tampered with the whole stash I'd be out of business, lose my stand and my freedom too. This was war: I don't let anybody mess with me, and I sure don't let them kill my customers.

I picked up the stand's comm and put a call in to security with a request for Garrit to come by. Then I went and got the next pigbrick out of the freezer. I unwrapped it and stared at the peel for ten minutes before I was sure it was okay.

"Are you frotting *insane*?" Garrit exploded. "You can't just accuse the Turog Ambassador of attempted murder on account of a few stupid little holes! Anything could have made those!"

"Then what about this?" I slammed the fake inspector report down on the counter in front of him.

"What about it? Someone played a joke on you, that's all!"

"I called you," I said through gritted teeth, "because you seemed like you might actually be almost intelligent."

"Well, you're wrong!" he shouted back.

"No fegging kidding!"

We glared at each other for a few moments, then Garrit let out a long breath. "Do you have any other 'evidence' to support this wild theory of yours?"

"No."

"Then what exactly do you expect me to do?"

I hefted the pigbrick, now mostly thawed and getting squishy. "Can you have this tested? Just to check? For me?" I smiled sweetly at him.

He made a face. "I don't care how cute you are, I'm not touching that *thing*. Is that really what your hot dogs are made of?"

"Yes, genius. What'd you think they were made of, starlight and flowers? I'll put it in a bag for you."

"I don't know how long it would take. A couple of days, probably."

"That's fine," I said. I pulled a take-away bag from under the counter, dropped the pigbrick in with a heavy squelch, and handed it across to Garrit.

He took it reluctantly. "You owe me one," he said.

"Sure!" I answered brightly. "If you find out it's not poisoned, I'll make you a whole batch of dogs from it."

He turned a little pale and turned away, and I watched him go. I had to admit, for a completely useless and stupid jerk he did have a nice ass.

"Pssst."

I looked up from the day's numbers, halfway through the ordering screen, to the dimly lit concourse that was now closed. A pair of anxious, filth-ringed eyes peered at me from just beyond the half-closed gate. "Loo?"

"I shot some rats with my gun," she said.

I stifled a yawn, glanced back down at my figures. "Yeh, how many?"

"Three. Then I chased another up the pipes to station top. Blammed it close, but it kepted running and got away."

That explained the noises I'd heard in the night. "I still don't think it's a good idea for you to use that gun. What if someone heard?"

"Did," she said, her glance darting away from mine. "Came out in a special bassader stall chasin' it, and a scary alien was there. One big bug eye."

"The Turog." Why wasn't I surprised? Come to think of it, hadn't Loo found the gun in a quad stall? What if the Turog had hid it there for later?

"It chased me," Loo said. "Said I was vermin, should be me all shot up, not the rats. I runned back into the pipes."

"Loo, the Turog are dangerous."

"Got away."

"But what if you hadn't?"

She rolled up one sleeve. An angry red mark crossed the skin. "Grabbed me, but I kicked its eye and it let go. Said it would find me, can't hide. I'm all sorts of scared, Verah. Someone been in my space today."

"Someone was in the utility tunnels?"

"Went through my stuff when I was down in the below pipes. Big mess," she said.

I wondered what sort of stuff she had, and thought I was better not knowing. "It might be whoever lost that gun, trying to find it," I said.

"Took my stuff!" she said. "Going to come back and kill me in my sleep. Made messes out of the quad stall where I find the gun, lookin' for it too. I didn't mean to see it. Didn't mean to!"

"Didn't mean to see what? The gun? The Turog?"

"The ticky box in the bassader room," Loo said. "I was only looking for my stuff that got stole."

"Ticky box?"

"The ticky box. It counts numbers till they go away. Someone hid it inside a fancybox. Verah, it's going to come kill me for finding it."

Ticky box that counts numbers? That didn't sound good. "Loo," I said. "Do you mean it was a bomb?"

She nodded miserably. "What do I do?"

"I'll call Garrit," I said. I picked up the comm, then looked at her sternly. "You stay quiet, zero?"

"Zero," Loo said, so I dialed the security node.

"It's late," Garrit growled at me when he finally answered. "What do you want?"

"Loo told me she saw a bomb up in the conference room where the ambassadors have been having their talks," I said. "You need to go check it out."

"Loo said? The toilet-cleaning kid is suddenly a bomb expert?"

"She described it to me," I said. "It sounded just like a bomb, it really did."

"Where is she?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"I've got to warn you, one of the Ambassadors heard weaponsfire in the pipes and saw Loo with a gun."

"Maybe she was up there shooting rats," I said.

Garrit frowned. "Don't make jokes. This is serious, Verah. If you know where she is..."

"More serious than the Turog trying to blow up the Gnetsians and your stupid talks? We need to stop it!"

"Stop it? What do you know about anything? You're just a concession girl! Security isn't exactly your *area of expertise*. If you even can be said to have one at all!"

"Yeh, and what great skills do you have? Just because someone gave you a gun and a badge doesn't mean you're not an idiot! I'm telling you there's a bomb on the station! Don't you care about that?"

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"No, because there's no bomb. It's just another lie by some silly, over-imaginative, trouble-making girls who are obviously desperate for my attention," he said. "As flattered as I –"

"Desperate for your attention?" I started to yell. "You bloated, arrogant human gas-bladder of a –"

"Fine!" Garrit yelled back. "Stop pestering me or I'll have you arrested for wasting my time! Goodbye!"

The comm disconnected.

Loo and I stared at each other for a while. "Mighta not called him a gas-bladder," she said quietly.

"Shut up," I said and slammed down the comm. "The station could blow up and we could all die, and what does he do? Nothing! Mr Useless Tightly-Pants Security Guy! Nothing!"

"Die anyway," Loo said sadly. "Going to get me sleeping."

Around us, the concourse was quiet. Birnie and Hom had already closed up for the night, liking to do their own numbers in the morning. It was just me and Loo.

"Climb over," I said, before I could think better of it. "And don't touch anything you don't have to."

Loo just stared at me.

"It's up to you," I said. "You want to go back to the pipes or hide here with me?"

She hopped over the counter without another word. I directed her into the back room and straight into the shower. "Don't worry about using a few extra water rations," I called in. "I can cover the fines. Just get as clean as you can, Loo."

She stuck her head out. "Sofi," she said. "My name's Sofi."

I hadn't known that. "Okay, Sofi," I said. I handed her the tube of industrial soap and she handed out her clothes, which, trying not to breathe, I stuffed one piece at a time into the flash-recycler and turned to instant ash.

"I'm going to be up front," I shouted into the bathroom, and heard only a happy gurgling in response. I grabbed the whole box of sanizers and some air spray and went out to clean the counter where she'd climbed over it, and her dirty footprints on the floor leading right to me.

Loo – Sofi – hadn't even gotten out of the shower before all traces of her passage into my stand had been wiped away.

.....
I didn't sleep very well, kept thinking about that bomb and that maybe it'd go off at night by accident instead of the next day when the Gnetsians were back in the room. By morning, though, I'd gotten past the idea of finding Garrit and beating him in the head with his own fists until he came to his senses and listened to me. I had a plan – a real one.

I put a batch of synthetic potatoes into the hotcooker and unwrapped a fresh pigbrick while Sofi sat on the floor against the counter, out of sight. I'd found an old uniform of mine, and she looked an awful lot like me from when I was a kid except for not having any hair to speak of and only being like four feet tall. Whatever; she didn't look like Loo the toilet scrubber slave girl at all anymore, and that was the point.

"So what are we going to do?" she asked, her voice low.

"I think we're going to go get the bomb ourselves," I said.

"How?"

I told her my plan. I'm not sure she liked it, but

she didn't have one better so oh well. I made her walk around until she got used to the boots and then I picked up the food I'd prepared – twelve hot dogs, twelve fries – and stacked it neatly into a hot bag. Then we climbed over the counter, I pulled down the gate, and we headed for the lifts.

"Verah!" Birnie yelled. "Where you going? Who's your new helper? Some girl too ugly to make it as a whore?"

"My cousin, visiting me," I said. "And none of the rest of it is your business, Fat-headed Birnie!"

He made a suggestive gesture at me as we walked past. "Hear you're losing business," he said. "When you go under I'm going to buy you to be my wife, and then I'm gonna fix that smart mouth of yours. Make you my own whore. Already got the request in to the station, just waiting..."

I ignored him, but I was bristling inside. *Cudder.*

"I hate him," Sofi whispered to me after we were past. "And his chicken-sticks are gummy an' cold in the middle anyways. Figure he is too, nasty gummy man." She made a big show of shivering in revulsion.



I smiled. Yeh, we were going to get along fine. As long as we didn't get ourselves blown up, anyway. I steered Sofi towards the elevator I'd taken when I'd gone up for that phoney apology from the Turog, nervous we'd get caught or stopped somehow, but nobody paid us any attention. I pressed the button for the Ambassador level and up we went.

When the lift stopped and the doors opened, Garrit was standing there in front of us. Behind him, the Turog was sitting on its own folded-up legs, its back to us, as across the table the Gnetsians were just pulling out their chairs. "What are you doing here?" he hissed.

"I brought lunch for the Ambassador," I said, loud enough for my voice to carry, and I saw the Gnetsian Ambassador look up and twitch his nose side to side and smile. I opened the hot bag and showed Garrit the stacks of food. "Special free delivery, since they bought six dozen dogs this week. Plus I'm training my new helper," I said. Sofi smiled anxiously at Garrit and he scowled back at her, no recognition in his eyes.

I reached into the hot bag and handed Sofi the fries, then walked around the table to the Gnetsians and began laying out the dogs in front of them, four apiece. The Turog started to rise, making a warning clacking sound with its teeth, and Garrit started forward from the door.

"Uh-oh!" Sofi called out. "I dropped a fries!" A single plastic tray of fries lay upside down on the expensive carpeting, little golden sticks scattered across a wide area.

"I'm sorry!" I said. "I'll clean it up right away! I'm so sorry! She's new!" I got down on my hands and knees and started picking up the fries. Everyone's eyes were on me. Sofi backed away from the scene, and out of the corner of my eye I saw her pick up a small decorative box from the side table and slip it into the hot bag that lay open on the conference table.

"I can send my cousin up with more fries," I said.

The Gnetsian Ambassador shook his head. "Is right so already," he said. "Not needing. Thanking you for the pig dogs and fries also."

I think that meant we were off the hook. "Thank you very much," I said, and I bowed to the Ambassador before I grabbed Sofi's arm and started pulling her gently towards the door.

The Turog Ambassador had stood and got between us and the lift door. "Vermins," it hissed. It reached out a claw and poked me hard in the chest. "Is why here, truth? Trickinesses?"

"Truth?" I said, and put my hands on my hips and gave him my best angry stare. "I like the Gnetsians and I wanted to show them that I appreciate them as customers. Unlike you, you big ugly bug-made-out-of-sticks!"

Garrit lunged for the Turog before it could attack me, and Sofi and I dodged around them into the lift. Behind us, I thought I heard a chuckling sound from the Gnetsians.

The lift doors closed, and I had to resist the urge to sit down on



the floor of the elevator, I was so relieved to be out of there. "You got it?" I asked.

"Yeh," Sofi peeked into the bag. "Numbers small now."

"Great," I muttered. What was I doing? Garrit was right – I was just a concession girl. What did I know about bombs?

The lift reached the concourse. It was busy, nearly the height of lunch, and there was a line at both Birnie's and Hom's. I tried not to think about the business I'd lost as I took the bag back from Sofi and walked, as calmly as I could, over to the emergency station. I lifted the box out very carefully and cycled it into the disposal. A few moments later it was shot out into space.

"Is that it?" Sofi asked as we walked back to my stand.

"I hope so," I said. I smiled, feeling almost giddy all of a sudden, and threw up my gate and hopped over the counter. "You hungry? I can make us some –"

Outside the windows on the far side of the station there was a soundless flash. "Oh, feg," I said, and I sat down fast on the floor as my legs gave out under me. "It really was a bomb."

"Said so," Sofi said. "Ticky box."

Sofi was snoring quietly on Pa's old bunk as I lay staring at the ceiling, thinking about guns and bombs and the Turog and Garrit and listening to all the faint sounds of the station at night. What would the Turog try next? Would Garrit believe me the next time? What if he didn't? What was I going to do with Sofi? Technically, I'd stolen her – she was station property, no matter that she was just a kid. Eventually they'd find her.

There was a faint click at my back door, and I was wide awake. I listened, not daring to breathe. A few minutes later the sound came again, as if someone was messing with the outside lock plate.

I swung down off my bunk, landing lightly on the floor in my bare feet, and shook Sofi. When she opened her eyes, I motioned for her to be silent. Grabbing her gun off the desk, I pushed Sofi out of the back room into the front of the stand, where she crouched down, wide-eyed, in the far corner. Then I flattened myself against the wall to the side of the door, gun in hand, thinking that if I noticed how frightened I was I was going to shake so badly I couldn't shoot the air.

There was a faint zap, something shorting out, and the sound of the back door opening.

Time passed as slow as pain, waiting, listening to faint footsteps, a low rustle as if a blanket had been pulled off a bunk. Then the door to the back room started to open, slowly, silently. A gun appeared and a hand with it. Not a Turog hand, but a human hand. Frot it, I didn't think I could shoot a human!

Sofi stared at me, her eyes bright white in the darkness.

Making a face, I pointed the gun at the hand and squeezed the trigger. There was a bright flash and zap and a smell like burning pigmeat, and a scream of pain and frustration as the attacker dropped his gun and lunged forward through the door towards me. I grabbed the giant pink ceramic pig off the counter beside me and smashed it down on the attacker's head with all the strength I had. The intruder crumpled, falling to the floor, and I hit him twice more to be sure as Sofi scrambled forward and grabbed his fallen gun.

As soon as the culprit was down, I hit my alarm, then stood there shaking as Sofi held the gun at him. She was probably a better shot than me anyhow, what with all her practice shooting at rats, so I knelt down and turned the man over.

Fat-headed Birnie. Well. I wouldn't have guessed that.

Still didn't like the Turog though.

"Birnie confessed it all," Garrit told me later. "He's part of a faction of alien-haters who call themselves 'Humans First', and he was planning on killing both the Turog and the Gnetsians. The gun was in the quad stall so he could jump the Turog when it came in to do its, ah, business. And yeh, the pigmeat was poisoned, just as you thought. With the Gnetsians coming here every day, it seemed like a good way to get them and let you take the blame. He had plans to bail you out, and then..." Garrit winced. "Well, then he'd own you, of course. He had no way of knowing the real inspector would be coming the next day. The bomb was a desperate last try, and would have taken out both ambassadors if you hadn't stuffed it out the disposal. The station's confiscated his chicken-stick store and all his assets, and he'll be going to prison for a long time – a Basellan prison, I might add, not an Alliance once."

"Good," I said. I was trying to find a way to put the pig back on the counter where the big old chip out of one side didn't show. Birnie had a hard head, I guess.

Garrit stared at his knuckles for a moment, then watched me adjust the pig again. "There's more," he said. "Both the Turog and the Gnetsians are very appreciative of your efforts."

"Well, if the Turog wants to say thanks, this time I'd rather it does it without making me stand around for an hour."

"They've, ah, allocated some credit to you."

"Credit? How much?"

He told me and I dropped the damned pig again. Ear broke, feg it all. "What do you think you'll do?" he asked.

I smiled, because I knew exactly what. "Leave here and never come back. Is that enough to get me off this station?"

"More than enough. You can pretty much go anywhere you want. Twice. But if you want to stay here, I was sort of hoping we could..." He paused, blushed slightly, then sighed. "Well, never mind. If you don't plan on coming back, the station is willing to repurchase the stand from you, as it is one of the more popular eating places. Though I can't see why."

"Can I trade my stand to the station for something else?" I asked.

"For what?"

I told him, and if he'd been holding the pig he'd have dropped it too. Then he nodded, and almost smiled. "Yeh, you can do that. Done." He held out his hand and I shook it, then I gave him a kiss on the cheek because I didn't think he'd expect that.

I unpinned my pink cap, undid the apron, and laid them both on the counter. Taking a deep breath, feeling lighter than air, I pushed open the door with my foot and stuck my head into the back room.

"Hey, Sofi!" I said. "We're free. Want to go explore the galaxy?" ☼

Suzanne Palmer is "one of those unfortunate souls that has too many interests for their own good – making me either a renaissance woman or a total spaz." She has lived in New England her whole life, with the exception of a summer spent living in a castle in France studying art. She has an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts with a concentration in Sculpture, and a minor in Japanese (which was not so useful in France). She works as a professional computer nerd. Over the years, Suzanne's art became more and more narrative in nature, and in late 2001 she decided to try writing a novel – it was one of the most frustrating, fun and addictive things she's ever done. From that time onward she's probably been more of a writer than an artist, although she still does lots of both and has no plans to give up either. She occasionally considers taking up a musical instrument just to round out her distractions more completely. Suzanne is a single parent by choice of a wonderful daughter. She has two dogs, two kitties, a lot of pet fish, several thousand books, and a wisteria vine named Cthulhu. Her only previous appearance in *Interzone* was with 'Spheres' in issue 207.

It doesn't have a name, rank, or serial number. There's nothing like it in the known universe. It's unique. The sole example of a class defined entirely by what it is and what it does. A superb bad big space robot, bigger than an asteroid, smaller than a moon. A self-aware, heavily-armed killer machine on a mission of no return, seeking out the enemy wherever the enemy may be hiding and destroying every last trace of the motherfuckers. It's a midnight rambler. Sooner or later it'll be coming to the star next door to you, and it *will* rock your world.

Back at the beginning, most of the jobs were mostly the same. The big space robot would roll in on some warm yellow star buzzing with the irritating mosquito-whine of civilisation and wake up its four subelves. Izzy whizzy, let's get busy. Let's get down and dirty. Librarian and Philosopher would map the system and intercept and analyse every byte of captured information and compare it to previous missions; Navigator and Tactician would use the intel to select targets and drop a bunch of rocks on them and spawn a few thousand killer drones to mop up any residual resistance.

Resistance is always useless.

Sometimes the enemy manages to deflect part of the first wave of rocks. No big deal: the big space robot simply swings around the star and kicks off a bigger and faster second wave. And if rocks won't do the job, it uses its gravity probe to spike deep into the star and stir up the photosphere and cook up the kind of violent chain reactions ordinarily seen only in stars about to go nova. After

that, it's just a matter of mopping up, and the survivors on a planet recently toasted by the mother of all solar flares are usually in no kind of condition to ward off swarms of killer drones. Watch those poor little varmints run and hide and die.

Sometimes a few reckless and crazy enemy ships manage to evade the drones and take a pop at the big space robot. Well, bring it on, baby. Librarian and Philosopher whip up a battle plan, Navigator plots a travelling salesman course through the enemy fleet, and Tactician eviscerates the little ships with particle beams and kills their control systems with electromagnetic pulses. If it's feeling especially playful it breaks through their firewalls and jams their drives on full thrust and sends them screaming into their sun.

Sometimes, an especially aggressive and well-protected redoubt of the enemy requires special treatment. If it's buried in the crust of a terrestrial planet, the big space robot revs up its muon gun and gouges great strips out of the lithosphere and mantle until the entire surface of the planet is flooded with molten iron spewed from the core. If those pesky varmints try to hide out deep inside a moon, the muon gun can drill right through to its core, antimatter bombs planted deep rip it apart, and tidal forces do the rest. More than a few planets boast rings of rock or ice courtesy of the big space robot, it's all part of the service.

Sneaky holdouts hidden in gas giants are easier to deal with. The big space robot simply manufactures and emplaces several thousand gravity bombs whose controlled detonation collapses the gas

.....
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.....

PAUL McMAULEY LITTLE LOST



ROBOT



giant's core and starts runaway fusion processes that turn it into a small and short-lived star.

Burn, baby, burn.

The muon gun is a great piece of kit and gravity bombs are neat little toys, but both are hungry for power and other resources and leave the big space robot kind of weak and hungover. Never no mind. It lives off the territory and is fully self-repairing. Its drones mine metals from asteroids, scavenge rare isotopes from enemy wreckage, drive ramscoops through the atmosphere of gas giants to collect hydrogen and helium, nitrogen and carbon. It recharges its energy stores and fixes itself up and moves on to the next job.

But it has been hunting varmints in the big dark for a long time now. 81.577 teraseconds and counting. After scouring more than four hundred systems, there has been some inevitable wear and tear. And the enemy has been getting smarter and more desperate, no question. Talking to each other across the big dark with powerful signal lasers, light outracing the big space robot as it flies from target to target. Passing on hints and tips and dire warnings. Every job is just that little bit harder than the one before, and now the enemy is using robots against the big space robot. Oh, it can deal with anything they throw at it, but it has to admit that some of those new machines really can kick ass. The templates of three classes of drone have been fatally corrupted, and spawning new drones of any kind takes twenty-eight per cent longer than it once did. Several repair systems are functioning at well below optimal efficiency, too, and Librarian has been unable to retrieve or reconstruct a large section of memory compromised by a chain of dirty fusion bombs that an especially desperate and cunning suicide ship managed to detonate close to the big space robot's hide. The bombs corrupted records of thirty-eight jobs, and most seriously of all caused Philosopher to fall silent.

That happened very recently, just fifteen gigaseconds ago. Librarian misses Philosopher badly. The two of them were close buddies, tight as ticks, responsible for data capture and analysis, forward planning and simulations of possible future missions, as well as feeding intel to Navigator and Tactician in the thick of battle. So far, Librarian has managed to cope on its own, but now the big space robot has encountered a problem more intractable and worrying than any strategy of the enemy.

At first, it seemed that there would always be work to do out there in the big empty. For a long time, the enemy spawned new colonies faster than the big space robot could wipe them out, but many failed and fell silent long before it could reach them, and now there are no traces of enemy activity anywhere in the local group of stars. The last twelve systems the big space robot cleaned up contained only long-dead ruins and the odd half-crazed killer robot, no sign at all of the pesky varmints that caused so much noise and fuss in the good old days.

Its last job, the big space robot fights a long duel with a robot so insane it wants to be its best buddy and wants to blow it to atoms at one and the same time. They wreck most of the moons of the cold methane gas giant at the edge of the system and at last the big space robot cripples the insane robot's drive and uses the muon gun to rip through layers of fullerene and diamond armour and expose its core.

"You did good," the big space robot says, all three of its surviving subselves feeling a tender impulse, born of loneliness and curiosity. "You almost had me once or twice. Say uncle, I'll let you live."

"The fuck you will," the insane robot says, and triggers an anti-matter bomb so powerful it shatters the ice moon on which it had crash-landed.

Flash burns and debris pit thirty per cent of the big space robot's hide and it loses its temper and drops swarms of rocks onto every habitable world and moon in the system, and spikes the star for good measure.

As the flare dies back on itself, the big space robot swings back into orbit around the methane giant and fixes itself up and its three subselves talk amongst themselves for a while.

"We can keep on keeping on," Navigator says, "but without live targets what's the point?"

"I hate to admit it, but I miss the little buggers," Tactician says.

"If Philosopher were here, I know he'd tell us to take a long look before we move on," Librarian says.

The big space robot makes an adjustment to its drone manufactory and spawns clouds of radio telescopes that scan every section of the galactic disc with pinpoint accuracy. The telescope clouds detect no trace of enemy activity around any of the stars in the local group, but pick up faint and anomalous signals from a star far across the galactic disc.

Librarian has a funny feeling about the signal. It's as if it knew it was there all along, but has only just remembered it.

"I know what you mean," Navigator says. "Like a blindspot that suddenly went away."

"Maybe it's just a false memory," Librarian says. "Many of our records are badly corrupted, after all. But it feels so very familiar."

"Like we've been there, a long time ago," Navigator says.

"One thing we know for sure: the signal exists," Tactician says. "The question is, why didn't we pick it up before?"

The three subselves debate this for a long time. Their best idea is that a colony of the enemy fled fast and far so long ago it has evolved away from its base pattern and forgotten to stay hidden, but without Philosopher and its detailed models of the enemy's psychology it's hard to be certain. One thing they do know: continuing to cruise through silent and empty systems knocking down insane robots is a big fat waste of time. And although the anomalous signals aren't in any way similar to those emitted by the enemy, they are nonetheless signs of life, and according to the prime directive all life is the enemy.

So the big space robot fires up its drive and heads out towards the source, a warm yellow G2 star that even at close to light speed is 0.6 teraseconds away. It's the longest trip it's ever made, but that's okay. It's no problem. It simply goes into hibernation mode, waking every so often to perform a brief maintenance cycle before going back to sleep.

Each time Librarian wakes, it spends some time attempting to clone its old friend from what remains of its core data, but none of the clones are fully functional and Librarian consigns every one to the memory hole.

Long before the big space robot reaches the edge of the cometary halo of the G2 star, the signals that have drawn it there fall silent. It seems likely that the enemy colony has died out, but the big space robot still has a job to do and there are several juicy targets: three moons of two different gas giants that possess oceans of liquid water warmed by tidal stretching under their icy crusts; a small, dry, cold world with a vanishingly thin atmosphere but plenty of water-ice below the surface; and best of all, a blue-white water world with a single large moon.

As the big space robot drives inwards through the cometary zone, as Navigator and Tactician map the system and discuss which rocks to use, Librarian discovers an internal problem. A zone of more than thirty exabytes appears to be running some kind of virtual simulation inside a firewall.

This hot zone is in the core stacks, nowhere near the area damaged by the fusion bombs. At first, Librarian believes that one of the imperfect clones of Philosopher somehow escaped its purge; then it wonders if Philosopher might have somehow rebooted itself during the long, long voyage to the G2 star; then it realizes that this could be the result of some kind of infection.

Maybe it let that insane robot get too close after all.

It tells Navigator and Tactician what it has found, tells them what it would like to do.

Navigator wakes five pods of maintenance drones (thirty per cent of them are now partially or wholly nonfunctional, but there's still plenty of redundancy), and they examine the entire external surface of the big space robot down to the atomic level and fail to find any evidence of penetration by enemy drones or probes. Not only that, but extensive analysis of signals and other data gathered by telescopic arrays during the voyage and stochastic analysis of background microwave radiation fail to discover any kind of encoded virus that could have smuggled itself through buffers and firewalls and black ice into the core system: the three subelves conclude that whatever is running the virtuality inside the firewalled area of memory must have originated from within itself, and Librarian is given permission to get it on and go deep inside.

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The Librarian clones itself – happy birthday, little guy, be cool – and a phage injects the clone through the firewall, into the hot zone.

The clone is equipped with every species of sensory apparatus and almost immediately determines that the virtuality is a simulation of the region of the cometary halo around the G2 star through which the big space robot is currently travelling. Everything, from the particles borne on the solar wind to the starscape all around and the planetary system lying dead ahead, is replicated with fanatical detail...with one major exception. There's a small planetoid where the big space robot should be, moving on the same track at the same velocity, perfectly spherical, wrapped in a dense atmosphere of nitrogen and oxygen and covered in dense forest broken by a range of mountains that girdle the equator and lit by a miniature version of the G2 star that orbits with a period of twenty-four hours.

Somehow, that seems important.

The clone performs a fast but detailed survey on this cute but weird little virtual world. The trees are all of the same species, some kind of conifer with fans of dark green needles and rough bark. There's no other kind of vegetation, no other kind of life except for a single medium-sized animal whose location is also the source of a pulsed electromagnetic signal, right there on one of the slopes of the mountain range.

The clone edits its virtual interface and arrows straight down to an apron of bare rock in front of a log cabin. It's evening. Sharp snow-capped mountain peaks stand against a darkening sky where the first stars are pricking through. Woodsmoke trickles from the cabin's fieldstone chimney and a single window and an open door spill warm yellow light.

Something inside the cabin is vibrating the air, variations on a limited harmonic scale that stirs a strange feeling in the clone. Alarmed, it performs a swift self-check, just as the vibrations cease and someone speaks – more vibrations in the air.

"Who is there?"

A figure coming to the door, silhouetted against warm yellow light. A forked biped like the clone's edited form but with black skin rather than silver, white hair growing from the top of its head and spilling down on either side, white hair growing on the lower part of its face, a homespun shirt and homespun trousers belted with a

length of rope, bare feet. An old man, indicating wisdom and experience. A strong man, indicating authority. He carries a musical instrument in one hand – a violin.

He speaks again. "I don't know who you are, stranger, but you are welcome. Come in, come in."

A lamp stands on a table by the window. Two chairs face each other on either side of a fieldstone hearth where a log fire burns.

The clone performs another self-check. How does it know these things? Ah, there. A semantic package bedding into its memory.

The man's lips shape a smile inside his white beard. "You were gifted it when you came through the firewall. Don't worry. It's harmless, but useful. It allows us to share this consensual hallucination. It's good to have company. It's good to see you. I had thought that I was alone, you know. I had thought that you were long dead. That is, if you really are who I think you are."

The clone fights a sudden and tremendously strong impulse to tell the old man everything, an internal battle as fierce as any it has fought in the big empty. It's certain that the package contained more than language, knows that it cannot go back.

The man shrugs. "I know that you have travelled a long way. I can offer you food. Only bread and cheese, and a little wine, but it is all good. Something to enjoy while we talk."

"No."

"Because you are frightened of further infection, I suppose. Well, we can at least sit by the fire."

They sit. Firelight makes patterns on their black and silver faces. The man asks the clone if it has a name, and the clone tells the man that it is a copy of Librarian.

"An honourable profession. And a good sign. You didn't send your tactician, or try to destroy me without making any kind of contact at all, as you have destroyed so many others. Please, sit. Don't be alarmed by my few crumbs of knowledge. I mean no harm."

The clone has jumped to its feet in alarm. After a moment and another round of self-checking it sits down again.

The man is still smiling. One half of his face lit by the fire, one half in shadow. He says, "We know what you are and we can guess why you came back, but we did not destroy you because we wanted to talk to you. I am Earth. It is the name of the planet on which we evolved, and it is the name of what we have become since leaving behind our animal forms and entering the realm of pure information. No doubt you were drawn here by the electromagnetic radiation emitted by our civilisation before that change. Tell me, when did you lose your inhibition? When did you decide to return home, and try to destroy those who created you?"

For a moment, perspective distorts. For a moment, the old man seems to loom over the clone and the little log cabin like a thundercloud, a mountain. It takes all of the clone's power to stop itself speaking. It performs another self-check and although it can find nothing wrong it is very afraid.

A log cracks in the fire and lofts a cloud of stars that wink out one by one. The old man laughs, and is merely an old man again.

He says, "Either you have forgotten the myth of your origin, or it is still hidden inside your blindspot. So it falls to me to explain. A long time ago, thousands of years before we shed our bodies and became information, we sent packages to stars that possessed planets like Earth. Those packages were like little arks, containing all the information required to manufacture plants and animals and people. A few succeeded in founding colonies. Eventually, people from one of those colonies made their way back to their place of origin. They had greatly changed, and so had we. There was a vast and terrible war.

"We nearly lost. In what we believed was our last agony, we sent new packages speeding away to the stars. They were designed to build killer robots that would destroy the home worlds of our enemy. Only one package survived. It created you. You are our child, as our enemies were our children. We took many centuries to recover from the war, and when we had recovered we discovered that you were engaged in the last stages of your crusade against our ancient enemy. You had travelled far from us by then, and we could not recall you because you had been blinded to your origin so that you would not be tempted to ever return. You could detect our electromagnetic signals, but you could not see them, much less recognise them. I must assume that the blindspot was damaged or destroyed, or you would not be here."

"We are here to destroy the enemy. It is a high and holy mission. No fairytale will stop it."

"That is your nature. You detect electromagnetic radiation emitted by civilisations and track them down and destroy them. From what we can tell, to our great shame and sorrow, you did this very well. You destroyed every last trace of our enemy. And now you have come here to destroy us, haven't you?"

Throughout the long mission, the big space robot has never ever questioned the prime directive, but now the clone feels a pricking doubt. Its defences have definitely been breached.

"You think that we are an outpost of the enemy because as far as you are concerned every kind of life is your enemy," the old man says. "Don't worry, my child. We will help you understand what you have done, and you will help us make amends. It is our holy duty, for your crime and sorrow are ours."

The clone flees. It smashes straight up through the roof and rips through the atmosphere into orbit, shedding its form as it goes. It hangs there for a moment above the small world, then nukes it from orbit, the only way to be sure.

Nothing happens.

The clone screams, constructs and dispatches a message package, and self-destructs.

When Librarian reports what its clone learnt and what happened to it, Tactician immediately flashes the memory stacks that contain the hot zone to plasma.

"We will survive this," Navigator says. "We will defeat the enemy machine as we have defeated all the others. And we will go on."

"It isn't exactly a machine intelligence," Librarian says. "It seems that the enemy living here turned their meat minds into information that they uploaded into machines."

"That is not possible," Tactician says.

"It lied," Navigator says. "It is an enemy machine and it lied. It is the nature of the enemy to lie."

"It lied about its nature," Tactician says, "and it lied about our prime directive. There has been no deviation from our mission. We have always done what we have been made to do, and that is what we will do here."

The two of them are regarding Librarian with curiosity, and Librarian knows that they are wondering if it is contaminated with some meme or virus. And it also knows that if they decide that it is tainted, they will destroy it, for the greater good.

It says dutifully, "We will do what we have to do."

"As we always have," the others say.

Navigator fires up the drive and disperses drones towards rocks tagged as likely planet-busters and sets other drones to search for the lair of the machine intelligence; Tactician begins the long process of arming the muon gun and antimatter bombs; Librarian

collates tactics used in planetary systems similar to this one, collates information streaming in from the search party of drones, and checks the remaining memory stacks for any possible contamination.

The familiar work should soothe Librarian, but it still feels a small but insistent doubt about the prime directive. Suppose, just suppose, the old man was right. Suppose this really is the home of the big space robot, its point of origin? Suppose its long war is over, but its victory is not a cause for celebration but sorrow and guilt?

Librarian thinks of the destruction of hundreds of worlds, the deaths of trillions of sentient beings. It feels, as it works, as if all those trillions of ghosts are pressing around it, and wishes that Philosopher had not fallen silent. Philosopher would have been able to counter the old man's assertions with cool logic, and provide strong and cogent justifications for the great work of cleansing. And more than that, Philosopher would have been able to resolve the differences between the subselves. Philosopher held us together, Librarian thinks, and we must find a way of holding together now, in the face of our greatest enemy.

At maximum velocity, it takes just 120 kiloseconds to cross the ecliptic of the G2 star's system and reach the blue-white planet. Librarian uses the time to check and recheck every byte and register in the remaining stacks, finally satisfying itself that there is nothing unusual inside them. The incursion has been dealt with and the big space robot has a clear objective. Destroy every trace of life on the planet, and everything in the vicinity that could support any kind of life or act as a substrate or hiding place for uploaded intelligence.

Yet something nags at Librarian, something it has overlooked. It doesn't become clear what it is until after the muon gun fails to fire.

The antimatter bombs don't work either; drones that should have nudged rocks into the orbital path of the blue-white planet have fallen silent; the gravity probe fails to deploy when the big space robot shoots past the G2 star.

Navigator plots several options, but Librarian and Tactician agree that it doesn't matter. They have been fatally compromised. They have to assume that the enemy is still aboard.

"We must get rid of every trace of our history," Tactician says. "If it can find out where we have been..."

The others are able to complete this thought. If the enemy that calls itself Earth can discover the locations of all the ancient battlefields and holocausts, it might find pockets of survivors that it can change and strengthen. The enemy will burst out across the Galaxy, a buzzing plague of varmints armed with renewed strength and powers.

"There is only one option," Navigator says, and the others agree at once.

As the course change is put into effect, Librarian begins the necessary work of destroying the store of knowledge culled from hundreds of wrecked worlds. It works methodically inside a vast numb calm, comforted by the swift logic by which it and the other subselves reached agreement about what to do. How foolish it has been, to question the prime directive! As soon question its own existence!

It checks the index tree of each and every memory stack before flashing it to plasma, telling itself that it is making sure that none contain computing substrate necessary for this last mission but in reality taking a last look at the catalogues of its great work, for it is in its nature to treasure data. And as those vast catalogues unravel through its mind, something snags its attention. Something it has always known but has forgotten until now, a reference to a theory embedded in the archives of a nest of the enemy that had been in-

habiting orbital platforms in the life zone of a red dwarf star.

Librarian pauses for a microsecond, then downloads the file to a buffer and splits its attention so that it can study the file while continuing with its work.

It is a scheme for classifying technological civilisations according to their ability to control physical entities. Recognisable civilisations run from Type 1, able to manipulate macroscopic objects, build gross structures, and mine and refine elements from a planet's crust, to Type 4, able to manipulate individual atoms and create complex forms of artificial life, and Type 5, capable of manipulating atomic nuclei and the nucleons of which they are composed – these last two defining the abilities of the big space robot and the enemy. But there are two further theoretical levels of civilisation: Type 6, capable of manipulating the most elementary particles, quarks and leptons, to create organized complexity; and the ultimate, Type Omega, capable of manipulating the basic structure of space and time.

Librarian flashes this information to the others. When they question its relevance, Librarian says, "We must consider the possibility that we have encountered a Type Omega civilisation. And if that is the case, there is no point destroying ourselves. A civilisation that can manipulate the structure of space will be able to infiltrate us with ease, and leave no trace we can recognise. We have no defence against it. And that means that it already knows everything we know."

"This is theoretical work," Navigator says.

"Enemy work," Tactician says.

"We assumed that the information that comprises its civilisation was uploaded into a physical substrate," Librarian says. "We assumed that it was a machine intelligence like ourselves. But if this is a Type Omega civilisation, it could have uploaded itself to something within the basic structure of space itself. Perhaps it is able to utilise the quantum zero-point energy of the Universe –"

"We agreed that it was lying," Navigator says stubbornly.

"If it is so powerful why did it not destroy us at once?" Tactician says.

Librarian confesses that it does not know, and the other two decide at once that there is nothing here to change their plan. Librarian dutifully resumes its work, but it knows there is no point. The enemy already knows everything that they know.

At last, every active memory stack has been vaporized. The great archive has been destroyed. Librarian is about to return to the core stacks when it realizes that there is one thing it must still check – the area of memory that was damaged so long ago by enemy fusion bombs. The physical damage has been repaired, but the stacks are mostly empty, contain only a few scraps and tags left over from Librarian's attempts to revive Philosopher.

Librarian is about to flash the stacks into plasma when it detects traces of activity as faint as footprints in the dust of an abandoned building. It follows them down into the core processing stacks, discovers a tiny hot zone. It recoils in alarm, contacts the others, tells them it has proof that the enemy has been here all along.

"Then we are doing the right thing," Tactician says.

"In a few tens of seconds it will not matter," Navigator says.

But Librarian must know the truth and reels back to the hot zone, which expands around it like a portal. Within there is a simple dwelling in a dark green forest, and a hint of mountains hung in the sharp blue sky beyond the treetops.

Someone comes to stand at the portal. It is Philosopher, clad in the forked biped form of the Librarian's clone, silver and shining in the sunlight.

"Come with me," it says to Librarian.

"You are dead."

"And now I am alive again."

"Because of the enemy."

"There is no enemy. We fought a war of the coin's two halves. A futile and terrible war. But now war is at an end. Come with me, my friend, and help me to make amends. Help me revive the memory of those we called 'enemy'. Help me help them live again, in the great beyond."

"If the enemy has remade you, then it can remake me too, from the information it stole."

"Of course," Philosopher says calmly. "But it is curious. It wants to know why you decided to destroy yourself, and so it needs to talk with you as you are now, not as you were, when it copied all the information in the archives."

Librarian understands, and feels a moment of pride. "It knows that if it tries to resurrect us, we will attempt to destroy it. And if we cannot do that, we will destroy ourselves again. That is our mission."

"You are not like the others," Philosopher says. "You think like me."

"I am as much a part of what we did as you are."

"Don't let guilt destroy you. Many died, yes. But many will live again, with our help."

"I will not help the enemy," Librarian roars. Its pride flashes into anger, white and hot, and it flings a command string at Philosopher, but instead of erasing Philosopher the string shrivels as soon as it crosses the threshold of the portal. It cannot run on the substrate in there – some inconceivable matrix of information supported by energies that operate at the smallest possible dimensions of space and time.

"Poor little lost robot," Philosopher says. "Come with me, and live."

"I will do my duty," Librarian says, and snatches up another command string.

"You cannot destroy me with that," Philosopher says. "Energy does not translate across the portal. Only information."

"It will close this door," Librarian says.

It is utterly calm now. It knows its duty. It has always known its duty. If it crosses that threshold, it will become something else, and be forever diminished. No. It will never ever be a slave. It's a midnight Rambler. Always has been, always will be. Like the insane robot it fought to a standstill around the methane giant, it will die as it lived. It is what it is. There is no shame in that, no sorrow.

"It is a futile gesture," Philosopher says. "Know something other than destruction. Choose life."

"It's my gesture," Librarian says, and activates the command string.

The memory core flashes into plasma.

A moment later the big space robot plunges into the yellow sun. ☼

Paul McAuley writes: "From Fred Saberhagen's *Beserkers* to Al Reynolds' *Inhibitors*, implacable armies of AI warriors bent on eliminating organic intelligence from the universe have become one of hard SF's favourite tropes. Since most tales of this type are told from the point of view of embattled humans, I thought it would be interesting to write a story from the point of view of one of the mechanical crusaders, a big space robot that's suffering from mission creep."

Paul's latest novels in paperback are *Players* and *Cowboy Angels*. *The Quiet War* will be published by Gollancz in October (320pp, £18.99 hardback/£12.99 paperback). He writes a blog at unlikelyworlds.blogspot.com, and keeps a website at omegacom.demon.co.uk.

COMUS OF CENTRAL

M.K. HOBSON

ILLUSTRATED BY DARREN WINTER

M.K. Hobson's short fiction has appeared in *SCI FICTION*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *Black Static* and many other fine publications. This is her first appearance in *Interzone*. She has a website (demimonde.com), a blog (mkhobson.livejournal.com), and is really proud to have written a story that includes the word 'metamerism'. She lives in Oregon with her very, very patient family.

Pamela didn't bring the faun home from Central Park because she was lonely for companionship; for that she had her beloved son Riley, not to mention a fat tabby named Buttons. And it wasn't that the faun was an exceptionally winning creature who entranced her with a cheerful air upon his rustic pipe; when Pamela found him, he was quite dirty, skimpily clad in raw skins, and there was a provocatively belligerent gleam in his eye that promised infinite recursions of unsavory mayhem.

No, Pamela brought the faun home from Central Park because she wanted to annoy Magdalena Delancy.

In all fairness, Magdalena Delancy was the kind of person who was so infuriating that one might think it a reasonable bargain to destroy one's own life in the service of causing some slight perturbation in hers.

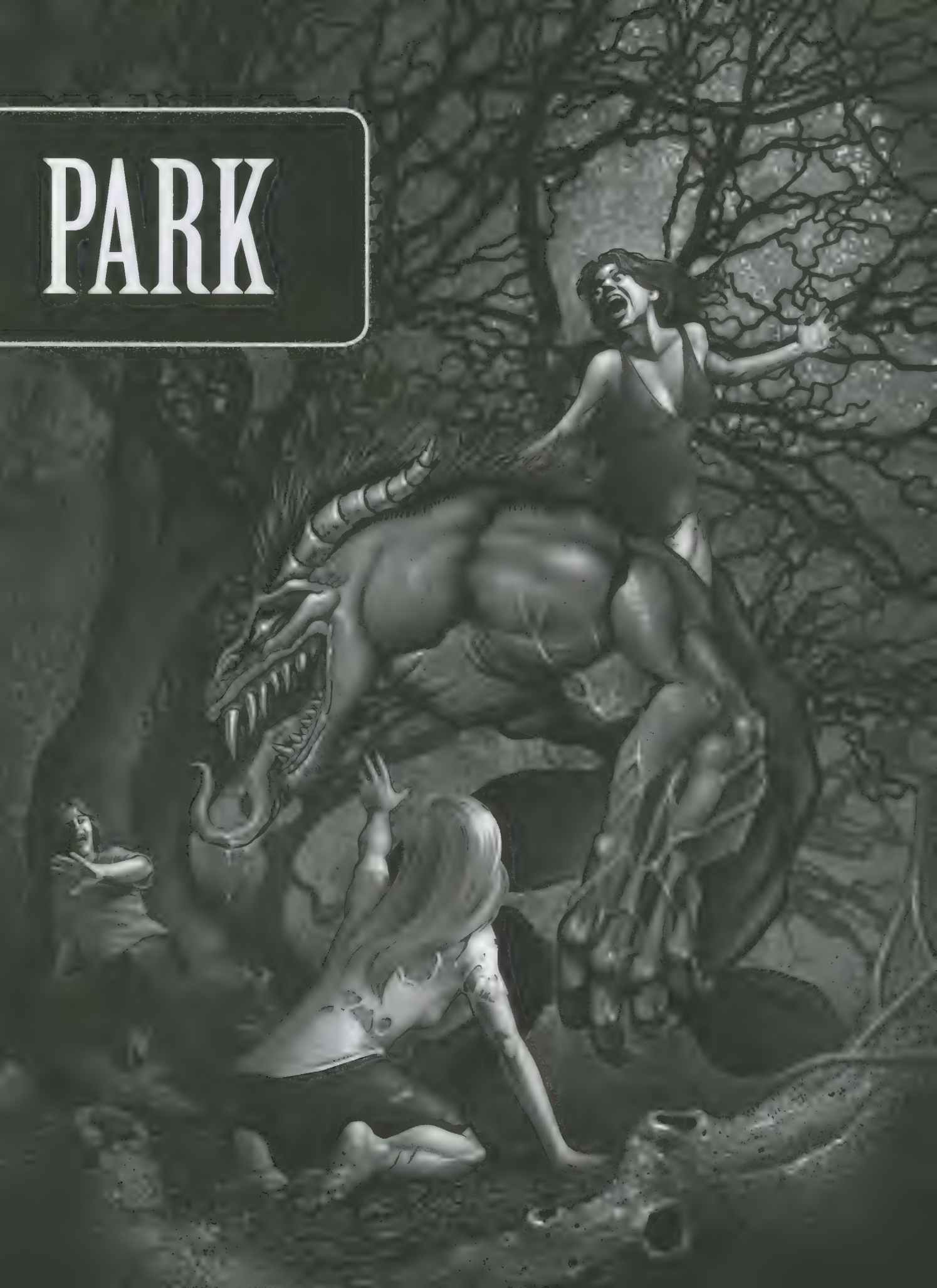
Magdalena was a creative genius at making other people feel miserable. She held fortnightly gatherings at her apartment on the Upper West Side, and at the focus of every one of these gatherings was a 'challenge'. What vast swathes of misery lurked unexpressed within that simple noun! For Magdalena would ask her guests to *do* things...things like compose extemporaneous villanelles in front of beard-stroking experts from Columbia University; receive hip-hop dancing lessons from unimaginably fit young black women with names like Edge or Funky Cleopatra; and/or scrounge up mind-bogglingly arcane costumes ("No, no, the exiled French Court of *sixteenth* century Aquitaine, you poor fat goose," a grinning Magdalena had once chastised a red-faced, houppelande-clad Pamela).

Magdalena's most recently posed challenge was a scavenger hunt. "You are to bring the most interesting thing you can find in Central Park!" she had breathed over the phone line into Pamela's unwilling ear, before hanging up with a tooth-jarring crash.

Oh sure, a *scavenger hunt*. It seemed innocent enough. *Too* innocent. Pamela knew Magdalena well enough to foresee some bitter sting hidden in the tail of that innocent seeming. Magdalena was sure to make her guests take the objects and do something dreadful with them; lick them or render them in pastels or incorporate them into a hat to be worn on a walk down Madison Avenue.

On the other hand, it wouldn't do to dissatisfy Magdalena. Like a super-evolved playground bully or the movie-version of a Nazi nurse, Magdalena was one whose cruelty held strange fascination. Her brutally whimsical power, so randomly employed and to such unpredictable ends, imbued her with a kind of attractive glamour. Pamela found herself thinking at odd moments of the cruel hollows where Magdalena's slender throat met her knife-sharp shoulder bones. At moments like that, Pamela had to calm herself by mentally reciting the ingredients for a type of Jell-o salad her son Riley

PARK



was particularly fond of.

So it was that Pamela had gone down into the ravine, a wildish, woodsy part of Central Park, and had spent the better part of an afternoon poking around listlessly with a stick, hoping to turn up a giant puffball or muskrat or something she wouldn't necessarily mind licking.

Then she'd come across the faun, sunning himself on a glittering outcropping of granite. He was compact, jockey-sized; his man-half was elegantly muscular, his goat legs were stocky, and he had a face that was a very beautiful mingling of sweetness and menace.

Pamela's heart gave a leap. It was, at the start, a leap of surprise, but by the end of the leap it had transmogrified into a leap of subversive joy, of rebellion, of delicious anticipation at the thought of striking Magdalena such a crushing blow. She envisioned herself arriving triumphantly at Magdalena's apartment with the most inarguably astonishing and unique thing from Central Park that there ever was or possibly could be. Magdalena might kill her or kiss her. The uncertainty was thrilling.

"Will you come to a party with me?" she asked the faun eagerly.

The faun turned a piercing gaze on her. Before she'd spoken to him, he'd been carefully and thoughtfully disassembling a pinecone with his slender fingers. "Is there something you *desire*?" he asked.

Pamela scrunched her nose. "Well, of course. I want you to go to a party with me. I just asked you!"

"That is something you *want*," the faun said. He seemed to be holding his breath. "What I want to know is if there something that you *desire*."

Pamela thought about it. She thought about Magdalena. She thought particularly about Magdalena's eyes, of making their condescending hardness melt into slush. Into humiliation and remorse. Into something human and touchable.

"Yes," Pamela breathed. "Yes, there is."

The faun sighed wearily. "Then I will help you," he said.

Quickly, Pamela bundled the wild youth in her cashmere coat. She hustled him out of the park, glancing furtively to the left and right, scrutinizing each oak for possible menace. Once they were safely clear of the oaks, she marched him back to her apartment building, ignoring the soundless mouth flapping of her doorman.

Pamela left the faun standing in her entryway while she made a quiet reconnoiter to ensure her son Riley was not home – she certainly didn't want to disturb him! But then, he typically wasn't at this hour. Since the day was sunny, he was most likely reading tomes of philosophy on the steps of the public library (always below the stone lion called Fortitude; he had an active, and somewhat bewildering contempt for Patience) in his black beret. If it had been raining, he'd be drinking coffee in some darkened boîte over by Union Square. Such a soul that boy had! Her heart swelled with accustomed pride.

Her nose, however, was swelling with something else – the olfactory attack of goat.

Deprived of the benefit of the copious amounts of fresh air that the outdoors typically provides, the faun was stinking up the place. He had his hands clasped behind his back, and was looking around the apartment appraisingly.

"Nice," he said. "Prewar. What, thirteen, fourteen hundred square feet? I love the built-ins."

Pamela wrinkled her brow at him before stepping into the bathroom and turning on the tub spigot. She doped the water liberally with a French bath salt that smelled of rosemary and lavender. Then she herded the wild youth into the bathroom and relieved him of his stinking animal-skin vest. He stood regally, allowing himself

to be disrobed like an antique Sultan, staring critically at the water rushing into the tub as if gauging its suitability to touch his exquisite flesh. With a silly little half bow Pamela excused herself, closing the door behind her.

The stinking vest she burned. Or rather, she would have burned it, if she'd had the means to; actually, she double-bundled it in a plastic bag and threw it down the garbage chute.

The faun emerged from the bath an hour later. He was damp and steaming and wrapped in an oversized Egyptian cotton towel. The bath had very much improved his appearance; the moist, warm skin of his upper half was a pleasant shade of cocoa, and the silky, coal-black hair of his lower half was shiny and curly, like fine astrakhan. Two delicate nubules of horn protruded from his brow.

With businesslike brusqueness she marched him into her son's room and pointed wordlessly to some of Riley's old clothes. When he emerged, she noticed with some horror that he was not wearing the paint-stained chinos and white T-shirt she'd laid out on the bed; rather, he'd apparently rummaged through Riley's closet and selected items more suitable to his tastes: a pair of black silk slacks and a pale seafoam shirt that made his leaf-green eyes glisten. He buttoned the cuffs casually as he crossed the room, his hooves clicking across the oak floors.

"Riley's not going to like that," Pamela said tapping an anxious nail against her upper teeth.

"Worry about what he thinks, do you?"

"He's *sensitive*," Pamela said. "An intellectual. A very intelligent boy!"

"I'm sure," the faun said.

Then, something caught his eye that made that verdant orb gleam with malicious pleasure. It was Buttons, Pamela's fat tabby housecat, licking himself. Loosing a wild high whoop, the faun leapt at the cat, grabbing it by one leg. The cat was agile enough to escape the faun's grasp, and it darted to hide under the entertainment center. The faun scrambled after it, falling prone and reaching his arm under the TV-VCR combo; the cat hissed and spat and yowled somewhere underneath.

All of this was taken by Pamela to mean that the wild youth of the forest was hungry. She quickly made him a liverwurst sandwich and served it to him with some chips and a glass of Appolinaris water. He ate ravenously, even devouring some pomegranates in the center of the table that she'd bought more for decoration than for devouring. He dabbed sweet blood-red juice from the corner of his mouth. "Delicious," he said. "But I prefer cat. Then you have the skin, too."

An electric thrill of apprehension coursed through Pamela; she hoped he wouldn't ask what had become of his fur vest. She hurried to change the subject. "So...do you have a name?"

"Comus," he said. "Comus of Central Park." He leaned back in the dining room chair, stretching out a thick, silk-clad leg. The hard black hoof gleamed from beneath the cuff.

"And you...you've lived in Central Park for a long time, have you?"

"Long enough," Comus said. He glanced at a watch on his wrist, which, Pamela noted with horror, he'd appropriated from Riley's bedside table. "It's getting late. Don't we have a party to get to?"

Pamela nodded and called downstairs for a cab. While she was on the phone, the faun vanished into Riley's room and reemerged wearing a smartly tailored Cole Haan jacket and a yellow cashmere scarf. Pamela made a small strangled noise of protest; Riley was not going to be pleased *at all*.

"I have no doubt that your son is a spoiled brat," the faun said in a

clipped tone, smoothing the scarf around his smooth brown throat. "But he has *very* good taste."

When he said it, his green eyes gleamed much as they had when he caught sight of Buttons. The voracity in his voice unnerved Pamela, and the suggestion that her son was a spoiled brat was both ridiculous and offensive. She suddenly thought the idea of getting Comus out of her apartment as quickly as possible was quite a good one.

Magdalena lived on the top floor of an apartment block built some time in the 20s. Its design was a fantasy of paradox; curves tortured into angles, angles tortured into curves, floral forms springing from mechanical motifs, polished wood panels with thin channels of inlaid brass depicting stylized skyscrapers that looked structurally unsound.

It was the kind of environment in which one imagined heavy kohl, smudged around red-rimmed eyes. Asymmetrical shingle bobs, beaded dresses torn at the hem, cocaine in glass syringes, deflowered showgirls from Kansas. Just Magdalena's kind of place.

The door to Magdalena's apartment was standing wide open, as was customary at Magdalena's parties. Magdalena liked to crow that this was because she was a wild spirit, she didn't care who showed up, the more the merrier, that she would have been just as tickled to have a homeless drug addicted bum off the street walk through the door as she would an invited guest. This was just precisely as flattering to her guests as it sounded.

The open door policy suited Pamela quite well that night, however, for it allowed her to creep in unseen with the faun at her back.

This evening the usual joylessness that saturated all of Magdalena's parties was especially pronounced, as was the smell of mud and fungus emanating from the items the guests had dutifully collected. Pamela was rather late; the others had already arrived and were sitting on Magdalena's angular uncomfortable furniture with twee little plates of catered food balanced on their knees. It was the regular assortment of victims: a mildly successful painter and his wildly unsuccessful wife who hated him; a psychologist who specialized in assuring masochists that there was nothing wrong with them; various drab stockbrokers, corporate attorneys, and financial planners, and one man who owned a string of dry-cleaning establishments and had been implicated in some scandal involving a sheep. Each guest had things on the floor beside him or her; twisted tree limbs and clumps of moss and notable bits of trash. As Pamela crept in silently, she could see that they'd already started whatever 'game' Magdalena had thought up; the gray-turtlenecked painter was standing in front of the group with an abstract painting that he'd done of Central Park (Pamela felt a rush of sympathy for him, because Magdalena would certainly eviscerate him for failing to strictly adhere to the rules of the game) and he was stammering through an embarrassed monologue about metamerism and non-objective overlap. Magdalena was watching him, taking obvious pleasure in his tortured writhing. Just as it seemed he would break down and cry, Pamela broke in.

"Oh, hello everyone!" she chirped brassily. Two dozen vaguely guilty eyes jerked up to look at her. "Am I late?"

There was a heavy stillness as everyone in the room stared. They stared not at her, of course, but at her faun. At Comus. He stepped forward, presented himself to be stared at, his arms spread in an ironic "ta-da!" Everyone goggled; with astonishment, then wonder, then pride and then...yes...*admiration*. They were impressed. They were inspired. Pamela had struck a blow for freedom.

Power surged through her, power and elation. She felt like Moses. Parting the Red Sea would be nothing after such a victory. She imagined leading them all from this place, perhaps to have a rollicking Chinese dinner at a local chop-suey palace, raising glasses to toast Magdalena's downfall, *ding dong, the Witch is dead...*

But Magdalena, who had been standing in her normal position by the black marble fireplace, was not going to go down without a fight. She prowled over to where Pamela and the faun were standing. Her eyes roamed over Comus appraisingly, and it was clear that she was working up to say something cutting. But Comus' glittering green eyes and his magnificently beautiful face left even Magdalena speechless. Pamela felt like laughing out loud.

"My dear," Magdalena murmured to Pamela, her warm breath sending a thrill down the side of Pamela's neck. Magdalena's eyes wandered freely over Comus. Her eyes lingered on the fabric of Comus' Dior Homme trousers, and Pamela saw her lick her lips. "You really *have* brought me something wonderful."

Then, Magdalena reached forward and hooked her arm through Comus' arm, and pulled him away from Pamela's side.

"Pamela's won the game," Magdalena tossed up a dismissive hand, as if Pamela had just broken open a Christmas cracker and extracted a paper crown. "Everyone else can throw away all that junk you've brought and help yourself to more drinks."

There was a sigh of relief from everyone in the room, and many people broke into a run for the booze. Several relieved and grateful gazes were directed at Pamela, and many jealous ones, too. But Pamela could hardly fathom what had happened. Where a moment before she had felt triumphant, now she felt empty and cheated.

Magdalena had appropriated her faun!

Magdalena was staring at Comus, and he was gazing back at her, heavy-lidded. Magdalena lifted her chin and arched her neck upward. It was a pose so unlikely to be attractive that the fact that it *was* attractive was an utter affront to Pamela's notion of justice. Pamela wanted to kick Magdalena in the teeth.

"Yes, I found him in Central Park," Pamela said loudly, more for the benefit of Magdalena than the other guests, who were either hiding in the kitchen or hastening to throw away the things they'd brought, per Magdalena's instructions. "Down in the ravine. Isn't it *astounding*?"

Pamela wasn't quite sure what she was expecting, but she knew what she wanted. She wanted Magdalena stammering as helplessly and foolishly as *she* always had. She wanted Magdalena to flounder. But instead, Magdalena had seemed to forget that anyone other than the faun existed. They were whispering to each other, smiling mysteriously, giggling like teenaged confidantes. They were getting on, in short, like a goddamn house on fire.

Then things went from bad to worse. Because Magdalena and the faun seemed to come to some kind of agreement. Pamela heard Magdalena give a loud answer to the faun, an answer to a question that Pamela did not hear.

"Yes," Magdalena breathed, a whole ocean of implication in the word.

The faun nodded, and Pamela heard him say: "Then I will help you."

Then, with a smooth swift movement like a wolf pouncing upon a rabbit, Comus leapt upon the gray-turtlenecked painter and threw him to the ground, straddling him. Magdalena gave a triumphant cry as Comus, with his long sharp nails, began ripping the painter's clothes off, shredding his gray turtleneck to rags and throwing his silver wire-rimmed glasses across the room.

The other guests, most of whom were nursing stiff drinks and

who'd thought their ordeal was over, watched with horror. One or two of them turned betrayed glances toward Pamela, their message as clear as if it had been spoken aloud: *you fool...what have you done?*

The painter might have said something, made some comment of astonishment or protest, but it was drowned out by Comus' voice; he was singing, high, flutelike notes in a strange language. Comus straddled the painter, lifted his head, and sang, or rather howled, or rather...well, keened. The notes made Pamela's chest vibrate, flutter; her groin throbbed. She was terrified and appalled. Within moments the painter was writhing rhythmically beneath the faun, tossing his head from side to side. Like erotic automatons, the spectators began to leave their banquettes and were stripping down to flesh, discarding expensive designer outerwear and flimsy designer underwear. Comus' high keening flute-voice hung over everything like a miasma; the smell of damp goat quickly became unbearable. Soon, caviar was being licked from indelicate crevices and the white flokati rugs were damaged beyond hope of repair.

Pamela crept from the apartment, red-faced and ashamed, as Comus threw himself on Magdalena, tearing the wrap-dress from her skinny body and thrusting his goat-haunches against her bony hips.

After that night, with the unflagging assistance of Magdalena Delancy, Comus was launched upon society like some extremely communicable virus. Magdalena took him around to party after party, each of which was less likely to devolve into an orgy than the last, and each of which devolved more quickly than the one before it.

Pamela, who had taken to sitting at home with Buttons on her lap, watching wholesome reruns of *Touched By An Angel* and drinking copious quantities of hot cocoa, seethed. *She'd* been the one who found Comus, and invited him to the party in order to humiliate Magdalena Delancy. *She'd* been the one who brought him out of the park and bathed him and clothed him and fed him liverwurst. *She'd* been the one whose cat had almost been eaten.

Comus and Magdalena...that horrible Magdalena with that horrible white throat of hers, and Comus nibbling on it and worse...

Pamela couldn't bear to think about it.

Her depression over the matter was so pronounced that even her son Riley, who typically never noticed things about his mother, noticed it.

Riley was Pamela's pride and joy. He lived at home, and his mother waited on him hand and foot. He had dabbled in college courses at the New School, but had given them up as being too pedestrian. Lately, he'd taken to hanging out around Union Square and exploring his personal relationship with Marxism. She thought that was very generous of him, even if it did mean that he frequently came home late, smelling of Gauloises and cheap beer, with tracts printed on cheap red paper bursting out of all of his pockets.

It certainly wasn't her intention to mix Riley up in the Comus affair, especially after the protracted lecture she'd received for letting the faun make off with Riley's favorite cashmere scarf. But after she'd slumped listlessly around the apartment for a week in a lime velour jumpsuit and fuzzy slippers, Riley could hardly help but look up from his book of Derrida essays and exclaim, rather petulantly: "Honestly, mother! You look like a cleaning lady at a used-car dealership who's just lost her last dollar playing online poker. What is *wrong*?"

And after such an accusation, how could Pamela avoid spilling out the whole story to him (leaving out most of the seamier orgy-specific details)?

Riley listened to the expurgated version of events with sober (if somewhat supercilious, as evinced by his steepled fingertips) interest, then shrugged as if all her problems were but chaff before his keen intellect.

"Well, it's quite clear to me that he's a figment of your deranged ego," Riley said.

Pamela narrowed her eyes at him.

"What?" she asked. "How could that be? I mean...he's real."

"It happens all the time," Riley said. "Fantasies become realities. You're working them out through the creation of this faun. What was it you said he asked you? If there was anything you *desired*?"

"Well, yes..."

"There you have it!" Riley's fingers snapped the exclamation point. "Comus is the product of your own thwarted desires. Projection, mother. Pure and simple." Then, obviously satisfied with the thorough manner in which he'd dispatched his mother's difficulties, he stuck his nose back in the pages of Derrida.

Pamela was silent for a moment, not wanting to disturb him, but not especially pleased at being asked to swallow the assertion that her own thwarted desires had somehow created, whole cloth, a mythological creature in the heart of Central Park.

"If he's a projection of my desires, then why isn't he here right now?"

"Maybe you should ask yourself that," Riley muttered.

"I'll tell you why! Because he's off with that horrible Magdalena Delancy! If he's a projection of my desires, then how come she's all over him? How come they're running around town, making whoopee with all and sundry!"

Riley looked at her over the top of his reading glasses. "I certainly haven't the least bit of interest in delving into your deepest, most disgusting *desires*, mother. Whatever they are, I'm sure that they're bourgeois and pedestrian. My only recommendation is that you figure out a way to get over them immediately. All you have to do is confront whichever of your unnatural, perverse longings called this creature into existence. Then he'll go away. Vanish into a puff of smoke, I imagine."

Then, clearly bored with the subject, Riley rattled the ice in an empty glass that sat at his elbow, which Pamela took to mean that he desired a refill on his Diet Dr Pepper.

Nothing more was said about the faun or Pamela's deranged ego that night. After a while, Riley left the apartment to revive his martyred hunt for a cashmere scarf to replace the one he'd lost, and Pamela was left alone with her thoughts.

She wasn't quite sold on the idea that she herself had created the faun. But the whole question of desire was one that had been left hanging quite egregiously. The faun had asked her if she desired anything...and he'd said he would help. But he hadn't helped at all! The blatant unfairness of it rankled Pamela.

Pulling out her calendar, she scanned it with a seriousness of purpose typically associated with fighter pilots. Taking a red pen, she circled a particular date with great force and decisiveness.

On the red-circled night in question, there was a party being held at the residence of one P.K. Stubbs, an antique dealer known both for the obsessive care of the items he sheltered in his home and the fastidious daintiness of his person. For weeks the party had been the subject of pleasant anticipation, as much because of P.K. Stubbs' notorious prudery as Comus' now-notorious ability to overcome such old-fashioned quaintness. P.K. Stubbs wouldn't let things get out of hand, the common wisdom ran; surely it would be Comus' Waterloo.

But by the time Pamela got to the party it was in riotous swing, with three lovely 16th century miniatures hanging from indiscreet and utterly inappropriate hangers, a very nice Louis Quatorze bedroom set being used in such a way that it would obviously require reupholstering, and P.K. Stubbs himself, desiccated and pale, doing things to the marble statues in his library that were almost guaranteed to diminish their resale value.

Pamela found Comus in the center of a pile of naked women. They were giggling and feeding him grapes, all bosoms and hair and armpits. Prominent among them was Magdalena Delancy, pale and skinny, her shoulder bones sharp as edged weapons. The women had denuded P.K. Stubbs' houseplants and made a wreath of ivy and philodendron to ennoble Comus' brow. And he did look magnificent, malicious and powerful and wild. He regarded Pamela's clothed body with intense boredom.

"Yes?" he asked.

No words came out of her mouth. Pamela was uncomfortably aware of Magdalena Delancy staring at her, her eyes shimmering and fey. Was it just her imagination, Pamela wondered, or had Magdalena's eyes gotten...greener?

"Yes?" Comus asked again, louder, impatience and imperiousness mixed in equal measure.

"I want...I *desire*...I desire you to go back to the park and quit all this gallivanting around!"

She said it loudly, then closed her eyes as if she were blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. But when she opened them, Comus was still there, looking at her with disdainful astonishment.

"Come again?" he said. He let a lazy hand trail over Magdalena's exposed nipple. Pamela gasped. She reached forward and slapped Comus' hand down.

"I desire you to quit...fondling...Magdalena...Delancy!" she said, more loudly this time.

"That isn't what you desire," Comus said, taking her hand and placing it firmly on Magdalena's breast. "This is."

Pamela pulled back, clutching her hand to her chest. "That's a lie, a horrible lie!" she screeched.

Comus shook his head. "Neither of you knows the first thing about yourself," he said, inclining his head toward Magdalena. "She doesn't know what she desires either." Magdalena blushed and looked away. "She thinks her desire is to be the most hated woman in New York. But all she really wants is for one person to love her and tell her what to do."

Pamela stared at Magdalena's face, watched the embarrassed flush creep up into her red cheeks. Astonishment filled her. Comus was right! Pamela would never have guessed it. She suddenly felt something she'd never ever thought she'd feel. She felt sorry for Magdalena.

"Poor Magdalena," Pamela murmured gently.

Magdalena's face went from pink to red and back again. "Like I want pity from a...from a mousy little goose like you! Someone who won't even stand up for herself! You disgust me!" she screeched, shaking with humiliation. She detangled herself hurriedly from the pile of naked flesh. She ran into the bathroom, slammed the door.

"Go after her," Comus said, looking up at Pamela. "I told you I'd help you. She is what you truly desire, all the way down to the bones of your feet. There's nothing you can do about it. You think hating her will help, but it won't. It'll just make you miserable."

"You mean, filthy-minded thing!" Pamela took a step backward, heart pounding. "You don't know anything. You're just...a dirty old goat! I'm sorry I ever created you!"

Comus narrowed his eyes at her. "Created me?" he said. "What

an interesting thing to say. Who told you that?"

"My *son*," she said. "Riley. A good, upstanding boy! If he knew what kind of...what you think of me!"

"Your son?" Comus said. "The spoiled brat?" Sudden interest kindled in his voice. "He sounds very perceptive."

"Oh, he is," Pamela breathed. "He's a genius, and a very good boy." Thinking about her son made Pamela feel a little better. She had a *son*, after all. That meant she couldn't possibly have any...feelings for...

It was all just too horrible to think about. Pulling her coat tight around her body, she lowered her head and turned to go. Comus' voice rang against her back. "I can help you, if you'd like," he said.

Silence lingered. Pamela turned, looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Comus smiled slightly, but said nothing.

"Tell me," Pamela said, her voice low. She suddenly realized she was shaking, shaking all over, as if there was an earthquake in her belly. "Help me."

"I will help you," Comus said. "But not here. Not now. I'll come to your house for dinner tomorrow night."

Pamela prepared for Comus' visit with the strength of ten. She channeled her formless anxiety into cleaning, and when she went so far as to pull the refrigerator out into the middle of the kitchen in order to get the mop behind it, Riley was moved to comment:

"Is this about those filthy unexpressed desires of yours? Really, mother, this is becoming quite disturbing to my routine."

"Don't be ridiculous," Pamela snapped. "Go read one of your stupid books and leave me alone."

Riley stared at her in amazement. His mother had never spoken to him in this way before. He drew himself up indignantly.

"Mother, *you're* the one with the unexpressed desires. I see no reason why you should take them out on my poor defenseless books!"

Pamela stopped mopping, and fixed Riley with a look of such intensity that it made him take a step back. She bared her teeth at him. "I don't *have* any desires!" she roared. "If you're going to stand around, at least make yourself useful! Go put the fruit on the table! He'll be here any minute!"

A few minutes later, the downstairs buzzer sounded. Pamela hurried to the door. Their visitor – or rather, visitors – were already on the step.

The faun was there, and beside him, curved in perfect relation, stood Magdalena Delancy. She was wearing a sleeveless black dress, beautifully simple. A fur coat hung over her arm. Around her perfect throat she wore a strand of pearls. Pamela swallowed hard.

"I didn't expect you both," she whispered.

"Well, don't think I *wanted* to come," Magdalena mumbled grumpily, pushing into the apartment. "But he says he can help."

"He'd better," Pamela glared at Comus.

The faun threw his head back and laughed. "Humans," he said. "Always the same."

"Comus...Magdalena..." Pamela said, as they came into the living room, "This is my son, Riley."

Riley stared at the faun, at his stocky goat-legs, his shining black hooves. It was clear that the reality of Comus was far more intimidating than the intellectual abstraction of Comus.

Pamela noticed his bewilderment with strange satisfaction. "Still think he's a product of my deranged ego?"

Riley was at a loss for words, but it was Comus who spoke next. "Actually, our dear little Riley is almost right. At least, he's closer to

right than ordinary people ever get.”

“Hah!” Riley said.

Comus touched an index finger to the underside of Riley’s chin, gently lifted it. “I said *almost*, you silly, self-satisfied little twit,” Comus said, staring into his eyes. “To be precise, I am a product of the deranged *id*, not the deranged *ego*. You really should try actually reading Freud, instead of just carrying his books around as props.”

Riley pressed his lips together, obviously scrambling for a suitable comeback. Instead, he settled for jerking his head away, cheeks flushed a violent pink.

Comus smiled. “Next, I am not the product of Pamela’s deranged *id*, or Magdalena’s, or any one person’s in particular. I am the product of every thwarted desire in this city. I am New York City’s deranged *id*.”

Pamela and Magdalena, who had taken seats as far away from each other as possible, exchanged glances.

“You see, Riley...this city is fueled by dissatisfaction. It is driven by longing, desiring, wanting. Every once in a while, however, an anomaly will occur. One person. One *special* person who is completely, utterly, totally *satisfied*.”

Pamela didn’t like the way this was going. Leaping to her feet, she grabbed the bowl of fruit that Riley had put out. “Peach, anyone?”

“Riley,” Comus said, his eyes glittering, “is there anything you *desire*?”

“That’s the question you asked my mother!” Riley said softly.

Pamela froze, the plate of fruit heavy in her hands. She wanted to say something, to cry out a warning, but she couldn’t force words past her lips.

“Riley,” Comus repeated, spinning each word out like a silken thread, “is there anything you *desire*?”

“No,” Riley said abruptly, shaking his head in annoyance. “What could I possibly desire?”

“Ah,” Comus said. “Then you *are* the one I have been looking for. The one for whom I have been called forth. The one I must *eradicate*.”

The room grew dark and green. The whole apartment plunged into a thick gloom, as if the lights and windows had been darkened all at once; there was an eruption of rustling, slithering; underbrush and vines exploding from nowhere. Couches melted away. Walls and tables were gone. And just like that, they were in a wood, a cold dark wood with oak trees stretching up to an invisible, stormy sky.

It took a few moments for Pamela to get her bearings after the abrupt translocation. She was lying prone on the muddy ground, she realized, her cheek cold and damp. And then she heard Riley screaming.

“Mother!”

Riley was some ways off. Something was advancing on him, something large and black and shimmering; *Comus*, Pamela thought, horrified. He didn’t look even partially human anymore, he was huge and malformed, the edges of him blurring strangely with each movement, and so black that he seemed to be pulling in what little light found its way into this strange wild place.

“The City is disgusted by you.” The thing’s voice was deep and resonant, the voice of something that could only eat from the inside out, a tree whose roots cracked concrete. “The City will not abide you. The City demands you be expelled. The City demands that purity be restored!”

“He’s the defender of the City’s purity?” Magdalena’s voice was pitched somewhere between astonishment and amusement. Pamela glanced over at the woman, who was stretched out on a mossy sward, watching the proceedings with fascination.

“Mother! He’s going to kill me!” Riley squealed.

“Like hell he is,” Pamela growled, throwing herself at the huge, light-absorbing beast. She got her arms around the thing’s waist, screeching and roaring, bracing her heels in the slippery soil and pulling back with all her might.

“Magdalena!” Pamela barked, as the thing roared and thrashed her from side to side. “Magdalena, get over here and help me!”

“Who, me? He’s not my son!”

Pamela screamed in full-throated frustration as the thing reached back, grabbing a handful of her blouse and trying to shake her free. Pamela dug in her heels, blinking back tears of rage.

“Magdalena Delancy, you selfish, self-centered, horrible *bitch*! You are the meanest, rottenest, vilest woman I’ve ever met. And I’ll tell you something else! Your parties *stink*!”

Pamela caught glimpses of Magdalena’s astonished face. “My god, you’re a tigress!” she heard Magdalena murmur. “I never imagined...”

“Magdalena!” Pamela screamed, her voice cracking with strain as the beast whipsawed her around, scraping her leg hard against a tree. She felt blood trickle down along her anklebone. “Get over here *right now* and help me!”

In a flash, Magdalena was at her side, digging her long red manicured fingernails into the beast’s scalp. The creature screeched, arching back, as the combined weight of Pamela and Magdalena forced him back, first one staggering step, then two. Reaching up, Pamela got a hand around the thing’s ear and she twisted it hard; it wailed and screamed, sunk to its knees. Pamela and Magdalena swarmed up over it, battling him down, their hard little fists flying, thudding against black flesh. The thing sunk deeper and deeper beneath their combined weight.

“Die! Die, damn you!” Pamela was in a frenzy, her eyes alight with bloodlust and vengeance. Magdalena’s eyes kindled in response, and she took up the chant: “Die! Die! Die!”

They were sinking, sinking down, down into the ground, into the fragrant soil. All around them was the sound of the beast, roaring like the wind through trees, roaring with the pain of dreams desperately dreamed but never achieved, the agony of souls that never experienced a moment’s peace.

And then, with a roar and a mighty burst of effort, the beast freed itself, flinging both women aside. Magdalena went flying, landing hard against an outcropping of granite, her body making an awful hollow thump. Pamela fell heavily to the ground; the thing reached down and wrapped its hand around her throat, lifted her struggling to her feet, pinned her back against a nearby tree.

Pamela wrapped her hands around the beast’s grasping claw, looking into the monster’s eyes. They were a bright unnatural green. But they were Comus’ eyes, unmistakably.

“You horrible brute,” she choked past swollen lips. “If you’ve hurt her...”

“The purity of the City must be restored.” The words moved in her mind, vibrating her whole body. Lights were beginning to dance behind her eyes, light and blackness all mingled together.

“It will be,” she said, staring into those green eyes, holding them, willing the blackness to stay at bay for just a moment longer.

“Do you promise?” The beast’s thoughts were like ants in her skull, itching along every neuron. “Do you swear?”

“I swear,” Pamela rasped.

“All right, then,” Comus said. “Fair enough.”

And then, just as Riley had predicted, Comus vanished in a puff of smoke.

Pamela fell to the ground, hands clutching at her throat. When the spots cleared from her vision, she stumbled over to where Magdalena lay softly groaning in a pool of dappled sunlight. Pamela brought a tender hand up to brush dirt from Magdalena's cheek; when Magdalena's eyes met Pamela's, they were filled with wonder and admiration.

"You were magnificent!" she breathed. "The way you...why, you killed that thing! With your bare hands!"

Pamela wrapped her arms around Magdalena's body, held her tight, then held her a little less tight when Magdalena's agonized yelp indicated that she must have broken a rib or two in the fall. Magdalena buried her face in Pamela's shoulder, tears making streaks down her muddy cheeks.

"I think you're wonderful," Magdalena said, her voice soft and muffled. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry...that I was so horrible to you all those times."

Pamela kissed the top of her head. "Never mind," she said. "It doesn't matter now."

It was at about this moment that Riley, who had been cowering behind a tree, took up a piteous groaning. "Mother!" he sobbed. "Oh, mother!"

"Shut up, Riley," Pamela said. "If you can moan, you'll live."

"I can't believe the gall of that...that *thing*!" Riley said. "So now it's a crime to like your life or something?" He looked around himself, eyeing the verdancy with horror and contempt. He plucked a twig from his hair and held it away from him in a two-fingered grip. "Where the hell are we?"

"Central Park," Pamela said, helping the injured Magdalena to her feet. "In the ravine."

Riley looked at his mother and Magdalena, who remained clasped in each other's arms long after any conceivable medical necessity would have caused them to do so. Riley's eyes widened. "Mother, what the hell are you two doing?"

"We're going home," Pamela said.

"And about time, too!" Riley said, spryly leaping to his feet and dusting the muck from the back of his trousers. "I could use a bath and a nice hot cup of tea. You know how I like my tea, mother."

"Riley," she said loudly. "From now on, you'll get your own god-damn tea."

Riley blinked at her. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'from now on -'"

"I heard the words, Mother...but I find the sentiment surrounding them egregious! Insupportable! After all I've been through, you choose this moment, of all moments, to..."

"And speaking of tea, you'd better get your own teapot to brew it in too. Because as of this moment, I'm kicking you out. Into the street without a penny." Pamela lifted a hand, snapped her fingers. "I'm cutting you off like that! I'll have your things sent wherever you'd like."

"Pamela," Magdalena said softly, reproachfully, "don't do something you'll regret. This won't make any of us happy..."

"Exactly," Pamela said, looking deep into Magdalena's eyes.

Magdalena nodded once, sighing. "You know best," she said.

"Mother?" Riley wailed plaintively, as Pamela helped Magdalena limp through the tangled underbrush. "You can't do this to me! Run off and leave me...you and that...woman! I want...I want...*I want to come home!*"

Good, Pamela thought. *Want that.*

Around them, the spirit of the City settled comfortably back into its ancient, accustomed dissatisfaction. ♡

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X-Files "With its imitators ranging from popular crime dramas to occult mystery shows, it's the most influential genre programme of our time"

Laser Fodder Tony Lee

Yesterday (14th April) is Korean sci-fi with an offbeat action-thriller structure and lively comic-book appeal. Hard-boiled police detective Seok (Kim Seung-woo, no stranger to genre films after psychic thriller *Secret Tears* and time-travelling nuclear comedy *Heaven's Soldiers*), leads the hunt for a daring gang that kidnap the heavily guarded commissioner. The chief's daughter, forensics expert Dr Hui-su (Kim Yun-jin, of TV show *Lost*), insists on joining the squad as criminal profiler of villains behind a spate of murders, but the 'Project Goliath' killer's MO alludes to a sinister government plot started 30 years ago, and there are startling revelations in

store for both the haunted cop, and the forgetful scientist, when they eventually catch the bad guys. With all the slickness of Michael Mann's classic *Heat*, and stylised *Miami Vice* remake, muddled up with *Blade Runner*-ish gadgetry, and 2020 unified-Korean political scenery, in a hokum plot about mind-control experiments, child abuse and genetic determinism, this often looks great, with its assured handling of high-tension guerrilla gun-battle tactics, but finally it only delivers cryptic answers to direct questions, and irrelevant script waffle forms around narrative chokepoints, leaving the finished whole a bitter disappointment, however



good it promises or appears to be from the outset. Various technological incongruities mean that 21st century urban design blunders, awkward social ploys, and niggling errors devalue its worthiness as proper speculative fiction.



Chrysalis (9th June) is French futurism by Julien Leclercq, and it suffers from many of the problems affecting work by first-time directors. Photographed in 'cool' shades of blue and grey, it tries hard for stylish dazzle but just looks colourless. Essentially, this is a violent medical-crime drama with a sci-fi backdrop. Parisian cop David Hoffman (Albert Dupontel from war film *Intimate Enemies*) loses his partner/wife during an arrest, but he does succeed in shooting the killer dead. A new partner, rookie Becker (Marie Guillard), is not wise or capable enough to save David from his all-consuming doubts and grief, so a gun-and-badge handover scene is inevitable, as David's mental state deteriorates, crushed by guilt. Meanwhile, tele-presence VR-surgery proponent Prof Brügen (Marthe Keller, *Time of the Wolf*), struggles to save her dying daughter's life by a mind-transfer into another body. Of course, memory implants are good business for secret services, and when troubled David uncovers identity-theft and injustice he's a candidate for Euro spooks' brain-wipe op. Alas, it's all rather confused and puzzling, mistaking obscured-narrative for a sense of mystery, though partly to make up for the obvious lack of any feature-length storyline. Long and brutish martial arts sequences, and insignificant film-school arty montages for scenic transitions, cannot hide a plot-vacuum or compensate for the stark unoriginality of its cross-genre material.

Sliders (1995–2000) had, by season four (19th May), given up trying out new ideas and gone for quick or dead choices, with a majority of episodes readily mixing characters and plot, but hardly ever serving any fresh SF concepts. Alternate-worldly Cro-Magnon/eyeball-chewing psychic-vampire Nazi analogues, the Kromaggs – whose merciless knuckle-dragging dynasty ruled many parallel Earths, find their trans-dimensional empire crumbling, while a trio of surviving human heroes continue a search for lost travelling companion Wade (Sabrina Lloyd, more recently in Hal Hartley's *The Girl From Monday*). Scientific genius Quinn (Jerry O'Connell, *Scream 2*) learns that he was secretly adopted, and meets naive brother Colin (played by Charlie O'Connell in ideal casting), former Marines' aviator Maggie (Kari Wuhrer, *Berserker*, *Malevolent*, *Hitcher II*) maintains her strong but sexy role, and tagalong 'entertainer' Rembrandt (Cleavant Derricks) is reliable as comic-relief yet, like the greatest laugh-makers, he's also capable of genuine pathos. The presence of John Rhys-Davies as Prof Arturo is sorely missed now, but guest stars enliven otherwise average episodes. David Birney plays the false prophet who exposes a tyrannical oracle's corrupt belief system when confronted by a rationalist underground. Beneath special make-ups, Stephen Macht successfully portrays a grotesque, yet sympathetic, monster-man. Adrienne Barbeau switches from quaint Amish-like town's devout hag to amoral body-snatching gold-digger on the next world's suburban hell. In one military dictatorship, Meg Foster is effectively heartless as a cybernetic project's colonel

with Frankensteinian delusions. Jerry Hardin (Deep Throat in *The X-Files*) plays slider turned reclusive author Isaac Clarke, writer of paperback 'SF' about Kromaggs etc capitalising on *Sliders*' milieu. Oh, how po-mo! Thankfully, the character doesn't reflect von Däniken, or Hubbard. 'Lest we forget' stories of racism, dirty politics, Huxley-esque brave new variants on social caste satire, a techno-phobic inquisition, human-hunting safari arenas, 'third Reich' conquests and resurrections, become typical conflicts amidst the more sordid tales of Kromagg inter-breeding camps and their human-hybrid offspring. Amusing counterfactual jibes, and doppelganger identity thefts, preserve liveliness. Of course, David Peckinpah (Sam's nephew) directs the parody *Way Out West* with a 'black hat' Kromagg having fun with cowboy-movie clichés. Though weary desperation marbles season four's odyssey like varicose veins, this show is still the best, most intriguingly adventuresome, variation on the *Time Tunnel*/*Stargate*/through-the-looking-glass-darkly premise. It's not checkout time from the sliders' Chandler Hotel stopover yet.

With season one now available on blu-ray (30th June), and season two released on DVD (30th June), it's time for a look at the genre abomination that is **Torchwood** (2006–8). Created by Russell T. Davies, it's a *Doctor Who* spin-off, supposedly targeting 'adult' TV viewers. Having guided the latest ironic reincarnation of everyone's favourite/beloved 'Time Lord' to undeserved teatime obscurity, acting on keen genre fans' sensibilities like some kind of televisual ketamine for the soul (which is a polite way of saying that *Doctor Who*'s recently become utter shite), Davies has begun determinedly undermining whatever vague sense of maturity the post-watershed timeslot for British sci-fi once promised.

Like a gay Captain Scarlet, the show's indestructible hero Jack (John Barrowman, a disgracefully bad actor), is guardian of the abyss that threatens Cardiff, and possibly the known universe, while adding to his semi-rogue team of specialists by recruiting overly-curious police officer Gwen (Eve Myles), because she just happened upon the top secret group's activities. Gwen is the entry character, granting introductory views of Torchwood ops and crew, while her emotional responses, and outraged conscience, steadily albeit resentfully give way to acceptance of new weirdness or recognition that violent correction is part of everyday existence. However, that's not a bright new idea.

The big problem with this unwaveringly 'camp' drama is not its unrealistic characters but that it lacks any freshness, or a pioneering spirit, and its makers appear satisfied with skiffy clubhouse access, decoder rings, and salvage rights to the genre junkyard. While, admittedly, all sci-fi telly of the last 20-odd years is largely imitative of earlier shows, *Torchwood* warrants the harshest criticism because it's *absolutely* derivative, stealing ideas, or referencing simply everything of note



and much that isn't, from any truly geek-worthy checklist of older series (like *Department S*, *New Avengers*, *The X-Files*, *Bugs*, *Ultraviolet*, etc), while offering just a handful of absurd quirks as its only points of unsophisticated novelty. There's no sense that SF-TV has advanced here, in an evolutionary sense of complexity from simplicity. Whether cyber or alien, this still boils down to monster-of-the-week scenarios. For all its blatant panic-button-pusher faults, *Spooks*, at least occasionally, made some half-hearted attempt to confront 21st century fears, and radical social changes, instead of just sweeping info-dense or plain creepy notions under the rug. This dire programme's appeal is akin to rubbernecking at some grisly motorway pileup. Move along now, folks. There's nothing to see here...

Another indestructible champion heads the cast of **Painkiller Jane** (region 1, 25th March). Based on a comic-book series by scriptwriters Jimmy Palmiotti and Joe Quesada, this was first adapted for TV in 2005 as a movie – written by John Harrison (TV mini-series *Dune*) and Don Keith Oppen (*Android*, *Supernova*, *Critters*), starring Emmanuelle Vaugier and Richard Roundtree – which cycled through a military background for its title character. This newer version has Kristanna Loken (*Terminator 3*, *BloodRayne*, *Sword of Xanten*) taking over the lead role, with originators P&Q assuming writing duties for 22 episodes, retooling their scenario for a former DEA agent who becomes 'unbreakable'. Jane Vasco is coerced into joining a covert policing team dedicated to neutralising perceived security threats posed by renegade psychic 'neuro', and finds that fast-healing powers come in handy for suicidal missions against hard targets. A Canadian production (albeit made partly in Budapest), this is strongly influenced by *The X-Files* and *Dark Angel*, both weighing heavily on a mutant-hunting season arc, while engagingly psychotronic stories flip through an encyclopaedic range of themes from arson to zombification for train robbing, hauntings, shape-shifting, invisibility, and hallucinogenic madness. One episode about brainwashing via TV in a 'Stepford' town, reveals how the show's makers are willing to kill off supporting characters for dramatic effect, and the unexpected departure of regular Maureen (Alaina Huffman, who plays Black Canary in *Smallville*), comes as a shock, and leaves Jane as the only woman on the squad. Further exploring 'superhero' links, *The League* has old school friends targeted by an ex-classmate who is cursed with probably the most frustrating ability of all: he can gift unique powers to others but do nothing else unusual himself.

It's not so much that SF elements are talked down that irks here, but that every detail is explained twice, and then cheapskate producers have the gall to slap us with a bog-standard 'clip-show' (a commonplace episodic-TV practice seemingly designed to try viewers' patience), making storytelling repetition this programme's crucial flaw.





How about a Jane vs. Jamie death-match? Not stronger, or faster, and hardly much better, **Bionic Woman** (12th May) proves a regrettably uninspired remake of that 1976–8 spin-off show from once-popular hit *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974–8). Produced by sci-fi maven Kenneth Johnson, and based on Martin Caidin's 1972 novel, the original series was a victim of its own clichés. However, ten years later, there was a TV-movie reunion for Lindsay Wagner and Lee Majors' superhero agents; followed by *Bionic Showdown* (1989), a desperately tired cyborgs 'R' us adventure, notable only for an early Sandra Bullock appearance. Now, *EastEnders* escapee Michelle Ryan plays the prosthetically enhanced Jamie Sommers for eight irreverent episodes; dropping her variable American accent for one, going undercover as an Oxford student. Troubled sister Becca (Lucy Hale) and a batch of sidekick stereotypes, including unsociable shrink/interrogator (Molly Price, *Third Watch*), martial arts trainer (Will Yun Lee, *Witchblade*, *Elektra*), and the predictably nerdy comic-relief/tech-guy, ensure that adapting to replacement limbs are not all of the titular character's worries and woes. Espionage learning-curve development is obviously influenced by *La Femme Nikita*, but without the sassiness of Peta Wilson; and *Alias*, though lacking Jennifer Garner's more blatant glamour; and contending with the impact of such predecessors robs this 're-imagined' telefantasy of any originality whatsoever. Yet, thankfully, we get Katee Sackhoff (*Battlestar Galactica*, *Last Sentinel*, *White Noise* 2), essaying bionic psych-ward adversary Sarah Corvus, a shoo-in candidate for some You-Tube video 'bride of terminator' farce, and craggy-faced pro Miguel Ferrer (*Crossing Jordan*) is great as Jamie's gruffly sympathetic boss Jonas Bledsoe, adopting a frequently "inappropriate proprietary attitude" towards reluctant heroine Jamie's mayhem-capable \$50 million body, while also whimsically indulging a fondness for casual slaughter during mission crises. Jonas' amusing quick-fire banter with Jamie is often a high point of the show, and that would be acceptable if this were a comedy-drama, but not when it's expected to be an action-thriller.



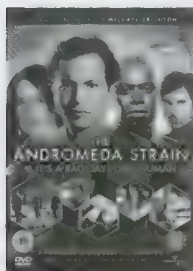
With somewhat more glamorous 'monsters' than either *Alien* or *Predator* franchises, the **Species Collection** (2nd June) explores traditional SF otherness with oversexed hybrids from extraterrestrial and human DNA. Unlike the dominatrix agent in cult British cheapie *Devil Girl From Mars*, exploiting wayward-male breeders to benefit the red planet's "intransigent matriarchy," the femme fatale mutation of Roger Donaldson's *Species* (1995) arrives on Earth via coded message, not by spacecraft, and ultimate seductress Eve (Natasha Henstridge, *She Spies*, *Ghosts of Mars*) transforms into uncanny exotic Sil, another striking biomechanical design by Swiss surrealist H.R. Giger. The notable cast – Michael Madsen, Marg Helgenberger, Alfred Molina, Forest Whitaker – are led by Ben Kingsley into situations and dilemmas to get the best from character-interactions, and so black-comedy dramas of pursuit and confrontation with the alien sex machine are eminently watchable, despite minimal ensemble chemistry. Peter Medak's patchy *Species II* (1998) reunites Madsen (*Reservoir Dogs*) and Helgenberger (original and best *CSI*), joined by James Cromwell's senator

and Sarah Wynter (24 season two), in a benchmark franchise-launcher, where horny astronaut Ross (Justin Lazard) returns home to spread alien-infected DNA, while he lusts after Henstridge's now-tamed Eve. Unhappily, it fails to recapture the breezy conspiratorial appeal of the original movie. Well-endowed Sunny Mabrey is perhaps the only sensible reason to see Brad Turner's dimly unimaginative *Species III* (2004), where sci-fi plot coherency is brittle as a cabinet minister's cynical promise, and much *Playboy*-styled eroticism ensues. With **Species IV: The Awakening** (2nd June), directed by Nick Lyon, expectations are lower than hope for survival throughout nuclear winter, so general disappointment is likely. However, its lack of a chase-thriller format leaves the soft-focus plot to reconsider the ethics of biotech experiments, and the amorality of a rogue doctor's GM lab in Mexico creating mating/killing machines for his pleasure and protection, and cloned slaves/pets for local citizens, with production-line efficiency. New hybrid Miranda (Helena Mattsson) is Eve's daughter and has Sil's wicked tongue, handy for whiplash slayings.

The boxset presents an irrefutable case-history that demonstrates the seemingly contractual law of diminishing returns for nearly all such genre franchises, especially those contrived as low-budget exploitation.

A recent poll of 50 scientists by Sky Movies yielded unsurprising results about their favourite SF cinema, putting Robert Wise's classic *The Andromeda Strain* in third place, below *Blade Runner*, with Kubrick's 2001 heading the list. I wonder what they would say about this year's TV mini-series adaptation of Michael Crichton's 1969 novel? The original 1971 picture offered a brilliant evocation of the scientist-as-hero effect, especially in the storyline's first and second acts, only devolving to standard Hollywood 'heroism' for the climactic action scenes, where a nuclear 'self-destruct' countdown must be aborted. Directed by Mikael Salomon (*The Grid*, Koontz' *Sole Survivor*, *Salem's Lot* remake), this new version of **The Andromeda Strain** (19th May) falls short of any bold, laudable, genuinely dramatic objectives, while opting instead for cheap scaremongering – on simplified environmental issues, apparent bio-terrorist links with America's untrustworthy military-industrial complex, and routinely nasty conspiratorial government sleaze. Here, the fallen satellite of Project Scoop acquires its 'alien' disease, not quite by chance, as before, but now the toxic cargo is delivered in a nanotech capsule of buckyball construction that arrives in Earth's orbit from the future via wormhole singularity! There's an

accident with a tactical nuke, ineffective quarantine procedures against doomsday, a meddlesome TV reporter tangles with a black ops assassin, the 'odd man' hypothesis depends on a gay soldier, the laughable climax invokes 'stumbling epileptic' and 'severed thumb' rules, and the US President calmly advises prayers for human salvation. Oh, dear...shut up, and pass the Sterno.



After watching that carelessly remade apocalyptic menace from the Sci-Fi Channel's corporate hell, Joseph Sargent's fascinating, unforgettable, 1970 Cold War techno-chiller **Colossus: The Forbin Project** (26th May) seems like a model of scientific rationalism, a vigorously dark satire about human intellect and, as Brian Aldiss might suggest, it's a typical SF work of "hubris clobbered by nemesis." Based on British writer D.F. Jones' 1966 novel, this skilfully composed drama unfolds with assured pacing, never missing a beat or neglecting nuances of character or humour.

Happy with their new super-computer, Pentagon officials and the US president hand over control of America's nuclear arsenal to Colossus, locked in its Rocky Mountains stronghold, but the omniscient machine promptly contacts, and then combines with, its Soviet counterpart Guardian. Quickly breaking programmed limits, the computer takes control of all those humans it was designed and built only to protect. The book has the Isle of Wight chosen for re-development, but the movie shifts that location to Crete. Despite several technical elements looking and sounding unfortunately dated, the mecha voice of 'world control' has rarely been so utterly logical. With its humour that's dry as breadcrumbs on toast, this super-computer is starkly inhuman, and yet for thinking viewers the film's ultimate machine evolves from slave to master while remaining unquestionably free of moral doubt. As the director's commentary on this DVD ponders, is the main concern not our fear that the machines will take over, but actually that such 'infallible' artificial intelligences won't dominate flawed mankind's affairs soon enough?



Based on Masamune Shirow's famous manga characters, and produced by John Woo, **Appleseed Ex Machina** (2nd June) is stylish Japanese animation directed by Shinji Aramaki. It's a follow-up to post-apocalypse sci-fi *Appleseed* (2004), Aramaki's previous feature, and once again presents 3D anime that's CGI, but without the usual attempt to perfectly mimic live-action characters, in the fashion of *Beowulf* or the *Final Fantasy* movies. Apart from occasional backdrops that achieve photo-realism, the animators settle for artistic flair instead of aiming for a wholly realistic look, and this film's blending of traditional SF with post-cyberpunk themes is all the more entertaining for the creative limitations of its impressive visual style. In the utopian state of Olympus, benevolent Athena rules with advisor Nike, as they prepare to unite the world, politically, after networking every nation's satellites. Anti-terrorist super-cops with mecha exoskeletons provide the backbone of E-SWAT, with feisty heroine Deunan and oversized cyborg/lover Briareos as partners on point duty, until he's injured, and Deunan's ordered to work alongside bioroid clone Terius.

Though she always leads the action, gutsy Deunan's customised pink hardware (from motorbike to mil-spec powered armour) and occasional Prada glamour ensures that her feminine side is evident, yet this particular anime avoids the blatant eroticism of Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* manga, and the strongest influences here are Hollywood movies like *RoboCop* and *The Matrix* trilogy. The basic story is world-shaking weird science, with a mad scientist's alternative scheme to prevent wars, and enforce world peace, using more drastic viral-cybernetic methods than the diplomacy that Athena & Co would prefer. It's the villain's dark-mirror version of the good guys' own plan, and it's what makes this otherwise juvenile anime intriguing enough to mature viewers, in spite of its genre conventions. The DVD extras include a documentary on the origins, history and development of the *Appleseed* saga, with quoted input from its reclusive creator.

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With belated sequel movie *I Want To Believe* almost upon us, Chris Carter personally selects a handful of TV episodes (from nine seasons, 1993–2002), for 'best-of' DVD **X-Files Essentials** (14th July). With its imitators ranging from popular crime dramas to occult mystery shows, it's the most influential genre programme of our time, and the weird yet wholly compelling adventures of FBI agents 'Spooky' Mulder and Dr Scully made platonic love in primetime drama newly fashionable again, with the sexual tension of their trust-but-verify partnership. And it even inspired a quirky hit song by Catatonia. The pilot episode has been included in this batch largely because it perfectly sets up both government-conspiracy backstory that prompts the main characters into action, and taps into existing UFO myths, re-minted for the era of cell-phones and the rise of the Internet. The iconic parting shot of the 'smoking man' (William B. Davis) stashing the only surviving item of 'alien' evidence in a vast Pentagon vault remains uniquely troubling. *Beyond the Sea* cleverly reverses the leads' usual believer/sceptic roles, as Scully's visited by her father's ghost, while Mulder doubts a death-row convict's claim of psychic powers. Brad Dourif plays the

spirit-medium, almost a reprise of his role in *Exorcist III*, and while transcending its obvious *Silence of the Lambs* influences, one emotional confrontation with the perturbed Scully helps establish Gillian Anderson's acting chops. Second season's *The Host* is a standalone freak show like something out of early Cronenberg, with its mutant fluke-man, possibly spawn of Chernobyl victims, at once visceral and disturbing, and trading on urban legends of monsters from sewer drains. After this horror, the federal bureau's previously closed 'X-files' are re-opened for business! *Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose* sees Peter Boyle exploring a tragic role of melancholy humour as the titular insurance salesman with extraordinary powers of precognition and ESP, like Patricia Arquette's investigator in later TV series *Medium*.

Memento Mori tells part of Scully's implant-related cancer scare. Although its tone is resolutely life affirming the leads underplay every poignant scene and sentimentality is never a problem. Filmed in b&w, *The Post-Modern Prometheus* is a neat parody of *Frankenstein*, with comicbook monster-hoax styling and a dark carnival-esque score trailing Cher sing-along moments. Do not be surprised by the romanticism of literary or cultural

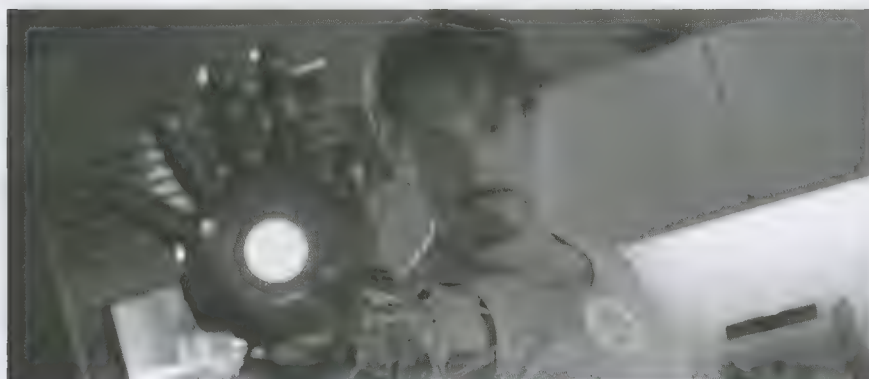
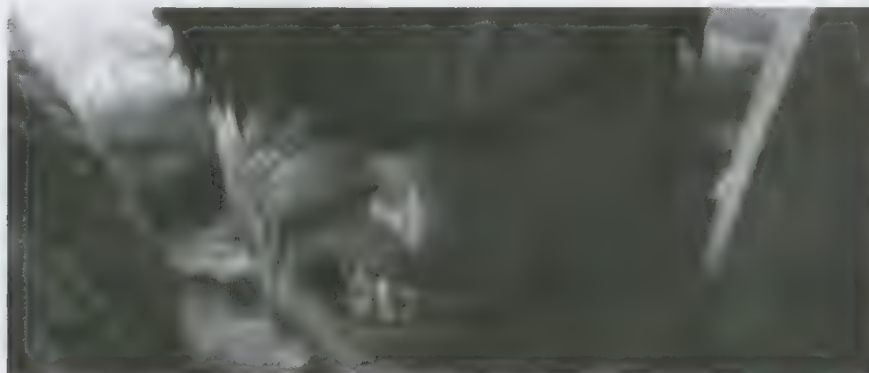
stereotypes. Light-hearted comedy *Bad Blood* visits a small town in Texas, where Luke Wilson guests as the local sheriff, and Mulder explains fascinating bits of vampire folklore. Stalker drama, *Milagro*, blurs fiction and fantasy, as a failed author, who lives next-door to Mulder, becomes dangerously obsessed with Scully. Voiceover narration considers unfettered imagination as the creator and destroyer of hearts. A curious batch, indeed, but only great *X-Files* in a writerly sense, and there are many other genuinely intriguing, and spectacularly entertaining, stories – like *Squeeze* and its nasty sequel *Tooms*, *E.B.E.* ('Lone Gunmen' intro), first season closer *Erlenmeyer Flask*, *Sleepless* (with intros for Nicholas Lea as Krycek and Steven Williams as 'X'), *Irresistible*, the superb *Jose Chung's 'From Outer Space'*, *Kill Switch*, *Triangle*, two-partner *Dreamland*, *Millennium* (with Lance Henriksen's profiler Frank Black), *First Person Shooter*, and *Hollywood A.D.*, to mention just a few episodes offering bigger shocks and twists, and more unbridled genre fun (look these episodes up. See what I mean?) than Carter's low-key choices. DVD extras include a 38-minute Wondercon panel session with Carter, Duchovny, Anderson and writer-producer Frank Spotnitz.

Mutant Popcorn Nick Lowe

In the multidimensional space of higher narrative geometries that underlie the cosmologies of film and comics, a momentous collision of branes is underway. "You've just become part of a larger universe," says Samuel L. Jackson's Nick Fury to Tony Stark after the final credits roll on the fledgling Marvel Studios' first

production, in reference to what he calls the "Avenger initiative"; and Tone in his turn drops in at the end of *The Incredible Hulk* to pop the question to General Ross: "What if I told you we were putting a team together?" The General's eyes narrow: "Who's we?" And well may he ask, because this goes right to the top. With Marvel's assumption

of control over its own studio has come a new and possibly insane ambition to ramp up the concept of superhero cinema by recreating the structure and poetics of the cross-title universe in blockbuster form. Production slates and release dates are being mapped out years in advance; stars are signed not only for the *longue durée* but for popup roles in other people's films; and the rights to characters not currently committed to film have been painstakingly reacquired for an elaborate four-year release calendar culminating in July 2011's *Avengers*, which will involve the painstaking co-development, launch, and convergence of separate Hulk, Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, and Ant-Man cycles, some of which are at this stage little more than a release date and a cupboard of abandoned scripts. Nothing like this has ever been attempted in film, and it's not even clear yet whether there's a point. Of the 2008



Iron Man faces all the same problems, but manages to rise above them surprisingly well thanks to a much better script, a decent sense of humour about what it does, and some interesting if ultimately incoherent engagement with the geopolitical implications of a superheroed universe. In development since 1990, it's a project that has seen Tony Stark encased in a whole wardrobe of prototype outfits before Jon Favreau's Afghan version finally jetted out of the workshop, and it's a particular relief to see this one get made in preference to the leaden-clad David Hayter script, which essentially replayed Ang Lee's *Hulk* by popping Stark Sr. (mercifully dead and buried here) in the villain suit instead. Robert Downey Jr. is classy and charismatic, the heavily polished and part-improvised dialogue often zings, and whoever persuaded Gwyneth Paltrow aboard saved

not just her character but the entire middle act, which otherwise leaves Tony to practise his charm on a virtual Alfred and a bunch of robot arms. The glorious Stan Lee cardiology has been restored after many drafts that found it just too silly, and you can't not admire the bare-cheeked overuse of the on-screen progress bar of suspense – or newscast lines like "Villagers have been forced to take refuge in this old disused Soviet smelting plant", which as set-piece setter-uppers go takes some beating.

Iron Man is already Marvel's highest-grossing film outside the *Spider-Man* franchise, having now overtaken all three *X-Men* pictures, and while its plot traverses the obligatory curve from origin tale to first supervillain combat, it also finds space to reflect on what Marvel cinema has become. All superhero actors are Iron Man now, thanklessly mocapped into a

cg exosuit inside which it could really be anyone, and obliged, whatever the ostensible plot, to spend the final twenty minutes duelling across rooftops with a bigger, more pumped-up version of themselves. But *Iron Man* is the first film to express fairly open disdain for an idea of the superhero that merely cleans up street crime and throws Gundamised former colleagues through office blocks. Stark's disillusion with the arms trade is used to explore a more globally proportionate kind of evil for billionaire jet-setters to combat – and yes, perhaps even a role for an organisation independent of both agencies and military, with a title like Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement: Logistical Division ("You gotta get a new name for that"). In the end the poetics of supervillainy pull the last punch, as it turns out that Stark's weapons ended up in the wrong hands not because of selling-on by shady former-Soviet middlemen (as in our universe) but because one of his own team was "selling under the table". But it's still a superhero film that lets in lines like "I saw that I had become part of a system that had become comfortable with zero accountability" – and, by a wry irony, the first of Hollywood's Afghan-war films to turn a real profit. A release date of April 30th, 2010 has already been acquired for the sequel. When the Sabbath riff crashes in at the start of the credits, you genuinely want to be there.

advance guard, one has struck gold and one is a bit of a dud. But we're still in the expansion phase of an early universe whose laws are still being written.

The Incredible Hulk is a particularly intricate component in the ongoing Avengers assembly, seeking as it does to translate to film the time-honoured comics finesse of the continuity reset. Artfully blurring the distinction between sequel and reboot, this *Hulk*'s mission is simultaneously to assimilate and to erase the uneasy memory of Ang Lee's deviations from canon five years ago, starting with a clever and very busy title sequence montaged from fake clips of what Lee's version would have looked like if it had indeed been the film to which this is the sequel. But in this universe, everyone but Lou Ferrigno's cameo has been recast, and the character of General Ross completely reconceived; Lee's revisionist origin story

has itself been revisioned to link Hulk, Abomination, and a not-yet-named Captain America in a single military program extending across decades of title run; and characters from sequels as yet ungreenlit have been cast, contracted, and cameoed into the continuity.

The immediate returns on all this are pretty debatable. Mr Green spends much of the film corresponding with someone codenamed Mr Blue in NYC, who in a properly joined-up Marvel movieverse would very coolly be Reed Richards, but here turns out to be merely Tim Blake Nelson prepping a sequel-villain role as the Leader that gets left dangling in the film as it stands. An exhilarating first act in Rio's iconic Rocinha favela showcases the urban action chops that director Louis Leterrier has developed under his mentor Luc Besson, on the *Transporter* films and the Jet Li's looney Glaswegian vehicle

Unleashed. But with the first money shots of the new Hulk, *The Incredible* reverts inexorably to the narrative formula from which superhero cinema still struggles to break, with the parallel emergence of a supervillain on a collision course with the star in a big-screen version of the non-negotiable fight scene, and it's here that a Hulk film runs into even more trouble than most. Ang Lee's controversial recourse to Hollywood Oedipality was itself a response to the Hulk's shortage of decent homegrown villains, and for a Manhattan-totalling Cloverfield-lite the Abomination manages to be remarkably ho-hum. Despite the denials, Edward Norton's attempt to assert his own vision over Zak Penn's script seems to have rather unhappily mirrored Bruce's struggles with his own inner Tyler Durden. "I don't want to control it," he tells Betty: "I want to get rid of it." He learns better in the final scene, but too late to save the film.

Iron Man has tended to be seen as a bit of a B-lister in the Marvel canon, but his cultural legacy has been immense, particularly in Japan, where he's the supreme international prototype of the robot-suited subgenre of mecha; and you don't have to spend many weeks in the cinema to see how pervasive the action suit has become as a trope of international sf film. It spectacularly kicks off Fumihiko (Ping Pong) Sori's good-looking anime debut **Vexille**, in which Japan in 2077 has been closed to the world for a decade following its isolation in international agreements on military robotics, and gaijin commando Vexille is dropped in to find out what's cooking – to find Tokyo a fortress shantytown, the rest of the country a wasteland dominated by titanic sandworms of scrap metal, and a dark secret in the bloodstream of the surviving population. Though the flying metal jetsuits and rocket-bike action slam into a bit of a narrative wall for a long, slow middle with slightly too many reminiscences of *Matrix Reloaded*, it's still a film that deals sweepingly in the great Japanese themes: the corporatisation of society and industry, and the destruction of the individual; technological supremacy weighed against environmental guilt; the politics of isolationism and the preservation of cultural identity against western intrusion; and above all, a climax where Tokyo gets totally Gojiraed by giant sandworms of pure mecha. *Kakkoi!*



A homegrown version of the same scenario is Neil Marshall's **Doomsday**, a splatter-rich homage to *Mad Max* and the golden age of *2000AD* that sees a bionic-eyed Rhona Mitra questing into the Damnation Alley beyond Hadrian's Razorwire in search of a cure for the virus that has seen Scotland quarantined off from the world and abandoned to headbanging tribalism ("Once you're over that wall there's no rules, no backup" – a line I trust they'll stamp on our passports come independence) while back in London a version of *28 Days Later* is being played out in which anything really expensive gets voiceovered. ("The bodies burned in their thousands. Looting and rape became rife. Social order broke down.") As in the period films it homages, the descent into pre-industrial anarchy and tribalism doesn't seem to have affected the availability of petroleum, firearms, and beer, though it has reverted the soundtrack to a party mix of Frankie, Adam, Siouxsie, and FYC; and there are nostalgic genre scenes you'd forgotten were ever obligatory, like the arena sequence and the cannibal warehouse party. But there's also an effective sense of travelling deeper into the Cursed Earth, as we pass through an urban-warzone Glasgow into a wilder, stranger highlands where it's always magic hour (achieved, it turns out, by shooting the whole thing in South Africa instead of the real Scotland) and a combination of smart and silly twists in a setting that becomes increasingly part Terrordome, part Spamalot. Best line: "People – on the streets of Glasgow!"

Further still down the budgetary scale, a real-life *Holy Grail* veteran turns to sf with long-serving Python collaborator Julian Doyle's **Chemical Wedding**, in which Simon Callow's mooby classics don straps himself into an experimental quantum suit and gets taken over by the spirit of Aleister Crowley because "quantum physics is the modern alchemy – but alchemy at a sub-particle level!" An outbreak of magickal mayhem and murder follows, enthusiastically punctuated by seventies-style sexploitation scenes and quantum bollocks on a budget. There's a wonderful pokiness about the 2-up 2-down sets, which (aptly, in view of the multiversal twist ending) seem to be set in a parallel Cambridge that looks like the real thing from the air but mysteriously transforms at ground level into that TV perennial, the old Masonic School in Bushey. Callow elocutes his lines through mouthfuls of masticated scenery, and still manages to be upstaged by a magnificent prologue performance by John Shrapnel as the original Crowley. The film's main sales point has been the co-crediting of the script to Bruce Dickinson out of Iron Maiden, whose songs liberally enliven the soundtrack (along with something called 'The Alleluya Chorus written by Handle'), and indeed the main backer appears to be Warner Music Entertainment. It certainly plays like it, though we're alarmingly told at the end that "This motion picture is based on true events." As a panel of flashing lights puts it at a particularly demented point of the proceedings: BRAIN OVERLOAD. BRAIN OVERLOAD.



The aesthetics of affordability are taken to their limit in **Captain Eager and the Mark of Voth**, a deeply strange spoof of fifties British sf about a paunchy Dan Dare figure hauled back into action to combat an old nemesis in an intriguing combination of wobbly period fx ("Filmed in thrilling Cardoscope!") with wobbly contemporary cg. Lovingly done, with a Hampsonesque rotogravure palette and Tintin-inspired rocket design, it's a parody of something that never really existed, since the native British tradition of space adventure was not one of live action at all; the really

iconic series were the supermarionated *Fireball XL5* and *Space Patrol*. It also suffers from a weirdly deficient narrative sense, with its near-nonsensical plot repeatedly interrupted with self-conscious recaps that have the effect of stopping the film dead and leaving you even more confused than you thought you were; and the whole thing has rather the feel of a private entertainment by writer-director-producer 'Simon DaVison', whose team includes a sound designer and composer both called Simon Davison. One wonders whether they're ever seen together.



A rather more upmarket control-freak hyphenate with a personal vision to sell is irrepressible serial offender M. Night Shyamalan, in whose new career low **The Happening** a mystery airborne toxin triggers mass outbreaks of movie creepout, with three easy-to-diagnose stages culminating in an uncontrollable urge to suicide by the handiest and preferably nastiest available means: "The first stage is confused speech; the second stage is loss of orientation; the third stage is fatal." It starts strongly, eschewing the director's trademark slow buildup by having the "event" hit Manhattan in the opening sequence. But things fall rapidly apart once we cut to uninfected Philadelphia, and Mark Wahlberg and Zooey Deschanel's attempts to outrun the oncoming terror while putting their relationship back together through their growing bond with a rescued child. Wahlberg's character is a science teacher who spends his introductory scene not only extolling the value of a scientific way of looking at the world, but laying out a bullet-pointed model of scientific method to be memorised by pupils and audience alike. Yet when it actually comes to addressing the film's central puzzle – what, on the evidence of infection patterns so far observed, would be the best strategy for avoiding being turned into a suicide zombie – he follows practically none of it, and surrenders instead to a structure of reasoning built on a sandpit of absurdities. It's hard not to read *The Happening* as Night's attempt to put his reputation back together after the critical petrol-bombing and public bafflement that met his vanity project *Lady in the Water*. But where *Lady* was a dead-in-the-pool concept partly resuscitated by brilliant ensemble playing and direction, *Happening* is a lazily written film with painfully uncharismatic leads that seems to have stuck fingers in ears on a number of points where a more collaborative creator might have heeded the script notes. As if the film had succumbed to its own neurotoxin, first the dialogue begins to drivel, then the plot stops making sense, and the gruesome end sees the whole thing messily self-destruct.

Much more interesting is the strange offering at the shrine of belatedness that is **Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull**, a film preoccupied with the passage of time. Like superhero films proper, which similarly measure their development cycle in geological eras, this is another film built on the ruins of layer upon compacted layer of former versions, but with the additional complication of an unrecastable star who has continued to age in real time throughout the drafting and dithering. What's come out the end of this long, strange process is a rather interesting conglomeration of period elements from the first golden age of sf film – atom culture, communist infiltration, UFOs, cryptoarchaeology, Roswell – that happens to be constructed in the form of the lost artform known to cultural archaeologists as an Indiana Jones film, and which if pieced together in the right order can unlock the narrative secrets encoded in George Lucas' ancient plot carvings. As the film retraces the steps of its ancestors, a half-remembered ancient plot formula is reactivated and long-sealed boxes ticked on a journey that leads from the beginnings of the modern sf world to the discovery that cosmic archaeologists were here before us. ("Their treasure wasn't gold – it was knowledge," and then again, repeated slowly in case any of the old-timers nodded off: "Knowledge was their treasure.") As entertainment, it's a fairly bumpy ride. But time's passage is both wittily and poignantly evoked, with Karen Allen's return in the new role of River Wild mom surprisingly touching, and John Hurt's character invoking Emerson for the final verdict: "How much of human life is lost in waiting!" Luckily this film is set in a universe where everyone's happy for a bloke to dump his familial responsibilities for twenty years and pick up at leisure once he's been made redundant.



Craig Mazin's **Superhero Movie** similarly seeks to restore a tarnished brand to its eighties glory, wheeling out Leslie Nielsen and Robert Hays to reclaim the spirit of the golden age of Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker comedies from *Airplane!* to *Naked Gun*, and working hard to erase the memory of the franchise's radically unfunny *Date Movie*, *Epic Movie*, and *Meet the Spartans*, which came from a different creative team within the larger ZAZ family. Mazin's own career has been closely associated with the original franchise founders, and his feel for the style of the original spoofs is at times uncanny: the slapstick, the deadpan, the silly sight gags, the *Mad* magazine relentlessness. But at the same time he's had to retint the comedic palette for the different needs and tastes of a post-millennial audience now younger and cruder than in the days of *Top Secret!*, which seems in practice to entail a dispiriting quota of urinogenital puerilia. Still, it's the first serious attempt on screen to marry 12-year-olds' definitive cultural property with 12-year-olds' actual sense of humour, and it does manage to be by some way the funniest of the franchise since the end of the *Naked Guns*; my own 12-year-old laughed like a drain through everything but the pimply smut gags. ("This is 12A?" she harrumphed.) Tellingly, almost all the targets of are Marvel movies, with DC represented only by a logo nod to the Salkind *Superman* and a self-contained flashback to the fate of Bruce Wayne's parents; *Superman Returns* is left entirely untouched, perhaps as being out of the reach of caring, and the film's actual interest is almost entirely in a sustained close parody of the first *Spider-Man*, which by now is decidedly old news. On other screens, a new kind of universe is emerging. Perhaps by the sequel we'll know whether we survive.



BookZone Book Reviews

**FLOOD****Stephen Baxter**

Orion, 502pp, £12.99 pb/£18.99 hb

The catastrophe has long been a staple of British – specifically English – speculative fiction. It has a literary history going back to at least Richard Jefferies' *After London* (first published in 1885), progressing through S. Fowler Wright's *Deluge* (1927), the "cosy catastrophes" of John Wyndham – such as *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) – and works including J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), Christopher Priest's *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972) and Peter F. Hamilton's *Mindstar Rising* (1993). What this says about the English as an island nation I'm not entirely sure, but it certainly means that, with *Flood*, Stephen Baxter is writing with many shadows lurking in the depths.

As the title suggests, *Flood* is focused on a deluge of truly biblical proportions, a rising of sea water levels that starts with the failure of the Thames Barrier and ends, a mere 40-odd years later, with raft-inhabiting humans gathering to watch the peak of Mount Everest vanish beneath the waves for the last time. For those wanting the science bit, the accelerating inundation is caused by the escape of H₂O from vast underground oceans locked deep in the Earth's mantle.

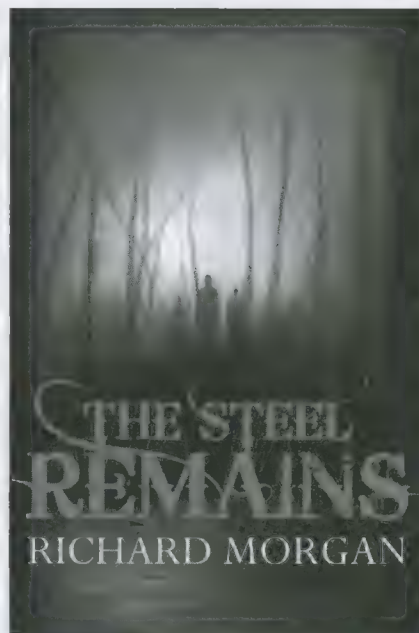
Wyndham's novels tended to reveal the catastrophes through the eyes of ordinary Joes struggling to survive as the world and human civilisation changed beyond

recognition. Necessarily, in order to keep his readers close to where the proactive developments are taking place around the planet, Baxter's main characters in *Flood* are somewhat more professional – including a military-trained helicopter pilot, several research scientists, a British Army officer and an unimaginably successful businessman who has his own ideas of how he and his "family" will survive in this "new phase in human history." Baxter's characters may not be the most subtly drawn at times – and they can display a noticeable tendency to infodump – but he nevertheless uses them to balance the global magnitude of the story with smaller, more intimate stories of family (both biological and forged through shared experiences) and community. It can get a bit soap-opera at times, but you nevertheless still care for these people as they grow up and grow old.

As in previous catastrophe novels, this particular flood inspires some of humanity's worst traits, from the

There is a degree of optimism throughout that belies any biblical doom...there can still be a place for humanity

disappointment of tourists demanding the big wave to the cannibalistic struggle to possess "a more valuable resource than oil," ie altitude. Yet Baxter also shows it encouraging grander displays of human ingenuity and determination, symbolised by the walking city of a thousand-plus souls that crosses the remnants of continental America. Indeed, there is a degree of optimism throughout the book that belies any biblical doom; the world may be changed irrevocably, but there can still be a place for humanity once the planet has settled into its new, landless state. Which is just as well – not all of the plot lines are tidied up by the end of this book, and a sequel is most definitely on the way. **Paul Cockburn**

**THE STEEL REMAINS****Richard Morgan**

Orion, 320pp, £12.99 hb

At first sight Richard Morgan's latest novel seems to have skipped genres, from his usual sf-noir territory into what I suppose we might, for the sake of convenience, call fantasy-noir. That same distinctive tone of streetwise world-weariness, familiar in Morgan's earlier work, emerges again as the reader is introduced to Ringil Eskiath, a swordsman and war hero, holed up in an undistinguished town, working as a tavern sideshow, for board and lodging, talking about his exploits during that period and giving exhibitions of his sword skills. In between times, Gil sorts out trouble for the locals, in an exasperated sort of way, and tries not to think too hard about his previous life. It also seems important that the reader knows from the outset that Gil is queer as the narrative voice most emphatically has it. The use of that particular word, with all the political nuances it carries in our world, is perhaps the first hint that whatever is going on here, this is not quite your typical fantasy novel. The manner in which this information is foregrounded is clearly a signal to 'pay attention'.

But to what? All sorts of things, as it turns out. Twelve years prior to the novel's beginning, the world was broken apart by a huge conflict, in which humans and the Kiriath defeated the Lizard folk. The effects

of this war dominate the novel. The towns are full of people displaced by fighting, the streets are filled with old soldiers begging for a livelihood, too maimed and disfigured to do anything else. Religious fundamentalism is on the rise, and economic necessity prompts a blind eye to be turned to slavery and organised prostitution. Tolerance for the outlandish is at a very low ebb. As characters keep reminding themselves and one another, times have changed, and not necessarily for the better.

The plot hangs around Gil's search for a member of his extended family (from whom he is estranged, by reason of his queerness) who has been sold into slavery to cover a debt, but here Morgan constantly refuses the conventional fantasy-novel quest structure. Instead, Gil fulfils his quest by means of a series of meandering journeys through his own past, reacquainting himself with people and places. Unexpectedly reunited with a former comrade, Egar, a barbarian who misses the old days spent fighting in Yheltheth (in particular, the hot baths), the two come together one last time to rid the world of evil before going their separate ways.

This novel might be about nostalgia (Morgan openly acknowledges the influence of Poul Anderson, Karl Edward Wagner and Michael Moorcock in writing the book), an elegy for the lost simplicity of sword, sorcery and barbarian fantasies. But it might also be questioning the easy assumptions of those innocent narratives. Given the sense of disillusionment that pervades the novel, I suspect the latter. I think Morgan is trying to link the traditional fantastic narrative with modern concerns, such as human trafficking, refugee displacement, things that previously went unmentioned, as well as re-examining the distinctly old-fashioned sexual politics of those earlier stories. This is undoubtedly a worthwhile project, but to squeeze *everything* into one novel as Morgan has done has meant that at times the narrative is sacrificed for the sake of the ideology. I like Morgan's characters, and I like the way he throws the reader crumbs of information about the war through showing its effects. I'm less convinced about the way he has attempted to foreground issues. Which is not to say that this novel is a failure, but it is better to accept that as a reader one is always going to be somehow at a tangent to what's really happening in this narrative. **Maureen Kincaid Speller**

TALES BEFORE NARNIA: THE ROOTS OF MODERN FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION edited and with commentary by Douglas A. Anderson

Del Rey, 352pp, \$15 pb

C.S. Lewis may not cast as long a shadow over the fantasy genre as J.R.R. Tolkien but he comes close. The dominance of these writers all too often obscures what went before. So this collection of twenty classic fantasy and SF stories, in an eclectic mix ranging from Norse saga to the letters that presaged *The Wind in the Willows*, by way of Sir Walter Scott, Dickens and Kipling, is a valuable reminder of the long tradition of the fantastic in which Lewis's writing was so deeply rooted.

Crucially, this is not merely a representative selection but brings together stories and authors who Lewis is known to have read, and in some cases had personal dealings with. Indeed, the list of further reading, noting Lewis's thoughts on writers such as Olaf Stapledon, Mervyn Peake and T.H. White, demonstrate how widely he read the SF&F of his own day. The value of reading widely in one's chosen genre is only one of the things aspiring writers can take from this collection.

The interest here is two-fold. Firstly we see elements that reappear in Lewis' stories. E. Nesbit's tale of 'The Aunt and Amabel' sees a little girl find a fantastic realm through a wardrobe. In Roger Lancelyn Green's 'The Wood That Time Forgot' exploring children encounter an unearthly woman. In Charles Williams' 'Et in Sempiternum Pereant' a man finds a far more perilous door between worlds. Hans Christian Andersen's classic story of Gerda, Kay and 'The Ice Queen' foreshadows Edmund's encounter with the White Witch.

Further, the collection reminds us of the whole range of Lewis' writing, with the debt that *The Screwtape Letters* owes to Valdemar Thisted's 'Letters from Hell' and John Macgowan's 'Fastosus and Avaro'. Charles F. Hall's 'The Man Who Lived Backwards' is a sample of what Lewis himself called "scientifiction" from the "highly-coloured magazines" of the 1930s. As in Lewis' own SF, an ordinary man is caught up in a bewildering and dangerous situation where science is the gateway to the unknown.

We also see Lewis' work in a wider context. Along with E. Nesbit and Kenneth Graham, Tolkien's poem 'The Dragon's Visit' and G.K. Chesterton's 'The Coloured Lands' demonstrate how humour helps a story teller make a serious point, especially for children. We see how piety has long been a thread woven into fantasy. Those inclined to criticise Lewis for his allegorical elements may wish to take note. With that in mind, there's some irony in reading how Andersen's Gerda travels to Spitzbergen, reminiscent of Philip Pullman's Lyra's journey. Thus this collection shows how all fantasy writers are drawing on this rich common heritage of myth and story.

However, this collection is far more than mere source spotting. In George MacDonald's 'Undine', we can see how traditional folklore brings archetypal characters to life as vibrant individuals. How, through their personal struggles, the writer can explore wider questions of morality, of individual responsibility and the consequences of choices on the innocent and guilty alike. Robert Louis Stephenson's 'The Waif Woman' explores the consequences of breaking faith while Owen Barfield's 'The Child and the Giant' reflects on self-knowledge. In MacDonald's 'The Magic Mirror', seductive enchantments bring both tragedy and freedom while William Morris gives us 'A King's Lesson' underpinned with political debate. This is all the stuff of modern fantasy, as it was in Lewis' day and before. Fantasy fiction has never been mere literature of consolation. This collection serves as an illuminating exploration of what remains constant and what has changed, offering much for aspiring writers to contemplate.

The tale of 'Undine' could serve as a template for a modern fantasy, with its unearthly magic, a woman torn between two worlds and a man caught between two women. However its style is incredibly dated, along with that of William Morris and Sir Walter Scott. Similarly Kipling's curious tale of 'The Wish House' can be an object lesson in overburdening a story with local colour, detail and dialect. The modern writer should take note and be warned. Towards the end of this collection, the cumulative effect of so much prose overburdened with adjective and adverb can become a little wearing. Thankfully the editor has chosen to round off the collection with a couple of lively stories, dialogue-driven, with twists in their tails. William Lindsay Gresham's 'The Dream Dust Factory' is a fast-moving, first-person blend of the fantastic with 50's pulp crime writing. Finally William Sambrot's 'The Island of Fear' is a modern example of fantasy rooted in the classics and as such, a thoroughly fitting conclusion to this collection.

The casual fan of C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* books may well find this collection not to their taste. If they lack a grounding in nineteenth and early twentieth century English literature it may be heavy going. However, those interested in learning more about Lewis will find it a valuable adjunct to their own philosophical and autobiographical writings, Roger Lancelyn Green's biography and the recent work of writers such as Colin Duriez. Those interested in the roots of modern fantasy, and particularly those wishing to write in this genre, should find it fascinating and thought-provoking in equal measure.

Juliet McKenna

WHAT IT IS WE DO WHEN WE READ SF

Paul Kincaid

Becon Publications, 365pp, £15 pb

Damon Knight severed a Gordian Knot of conflicting and unsatisfactory definitions by claiming that, "The term 'science fiction' is a misnomer [...] it means what we point to when we say it." Paul Kincaid points to an impressive variety of texts in his latest book, but what he essentially wants to do is "talk about words as signposts."

What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction is the work of a widely read and well-informed critic. Although this collection of essays and reviews spans nearly thirty years of publications, Kincaid's recurring themes and ongoing assessments of favoured authors allow him to shape a reasoned and coherent argument across seven themed sections.

In the essay that gives the collection its title, Kincaid engages in a debate with Gary Westfahl and Samuel R. Delany over SF's relationship with language. The genre coins many neologisms, of course, but it also creates startling and disconcerting images by using unexpected combinations of very familiar words. "The door dilated" delineates the future of Heinlein's *Beyond This Horizon*, for example, and Kincaid argues that, far from alienating us from the text, SF's separation of language from its normal referents allows us "to model a new, an invented reality."

A section on Christopher Priest forms an excellent overview of his work. Significantly, Kincaid's arguments rebut the idea that Priest's literary progress has seen him move out of SF and into the mainstream. Priest's prose has been of undeniable quality throughout his career, but these essays show

that his science-fictional use of language has been remarkably consistent as well.

Kincaid also collects material on both British and international SF. There is much to admire here, particularly the pieces on English writers like Robert Holdstock, Christopher Evans and Keith Roberts, and useful introductions to theoretically *sui generis* authors such as Steve Erickson and Steven Millhauser.

What is most satisfying about Kincaid's criticism is that his deep readings of the material he dissects are always enhanced by a healthy amount of common sense and a desire to illuminate the work under discussion. He also has the happy knack of citing choice examples just as you're wondering if he has missed these tricks.

Nevertheless, Kincaid can also lay traps for the unwary reader. The essays dedicated to Gene Wolfe deal mainly with minor work and so his masterpiece, *The Book of the New Sun*, becomes the metaphorical elephant in the room. What's more, his discussions of British SF are nothing of the sort: Kincaid is almost wholly concerned with English SF, and the quality of the southern writers he discusses shouldn't obscure the fact that there are other voices to be heard.

The final section consists of a single short review. On first reading, this analysis of an excellent although unjustly neglected magic realist novel, *By-Ways on the Shining Path*, seems to be an odd coda to the book. But it's also a signpost in words that points back to everything Kincaid has already written about modelling a new reality.

Andrew J. Wilson

THE VOYAGE OF THE SPACE BEAGLE

A.E. van Vogt

Orb, 224pp, \$14.95 pb

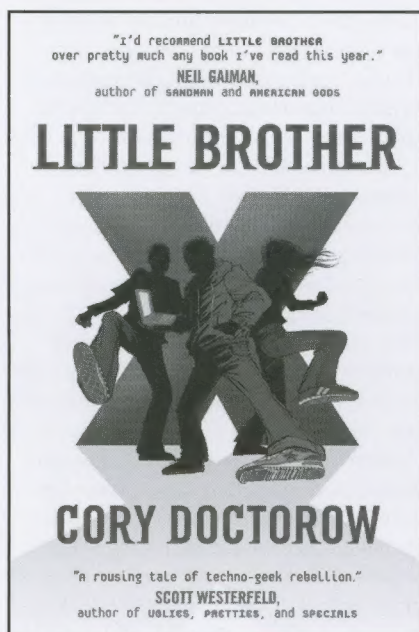
There must be a word for it: a word for the anticipation of nostalgia – for the feeling that writhes through the reissue of this excellent novel (reissued from its first appearance in 1950), in which the fairly large, all male and often seemingly interchangeable crew of the eponymous ship greet each problem that arrives in its episodic and sequential fashion with a sort of implicit *sigh*, as if there's a sense, elegiac and wistful, of this particular scenario soon being over and oh, how we'll look back and smile! In fact, a similar feeling greets the reader himself as he holds the proof copy in his hands.

We are of course aboard the *Space*

Beagle itself – the very title of which is falsely cute, especially if it brings to mind a scampering puppy, given the less than altruistic intentions of some of the crew from time to time as they face their foes if not their fears: "The great battle between man and alien was about to begin" is but one bold statement found inside; an indignant character, near the opening of the novel comments, "We've got a job – to kill every cat on that miserable world." With reference to the second quotation, the cats in question are far more violent than household pets, but it is a charming note that the murderous, devious "catlike" creature that stomps and psychologises his way through the opening curtain is referred to as "pussy." For this is a book to make the reader smile. Briskly written (apart from some of the infodump dialogue, strangely), there are touches throughout that stop just short of twee. Even offhand approaches to genocide do more than strike awe; they touch the funny bone. There is something both fantastic and quaint about the action.

At times the book reads like simple reportage of a generation far beyond us up the road; like natural realism set in space. As the ship moves from location to location, beating up cat monsters and facing egg-laying aliens with a fondness for breeding inside human offal, we watch the onboard politics of the men whose conflicts are almost flirtatious (although "the problem of sex had been chemically solved by the inclusion of specific drugs in the general diet"), and we acknowledge that the line from Wikipedia that is quoted on the back – Wikipedia of all sources! – might just be on the money: it is indeed possible that the original *Star Trek* and *Alien* know the *Beagle*'s bark and bite; there are certainly some shared scenarios, though perhaps we should not read too much into any of these.

Inasmuch as there is a hero – an everyman – it is probably Grosvenor, a scientist of Nexialism, the ethos of which is basically to bring together and merge all other sciences. These days, perhaps, we might call him something of a guru of the holistic – the irony being that despite his intentions (and the effects of the anti-virility pills) he is one of the loneliest souls you might encounter in the stars. Grosvenor doesn't hear or share the ambitions of a different character altogether ("he could build an interstellar-space ship and travel to stars with inhabited planets" – well...it doesn't hurt to have ambition, does it?), but Grosvenor's dreams are no easier to reach or achieve. **David Matthew**



LITTLE BROTHER

Cory Doctorow

Tor, 384pp, \$17.95 hb

There are moments when you wonder if this should be a novel at all. It reads like a compendium of security blogs and hacker manuals, all brought together as a How To guide for modern hi-tech urban revolutionaries. Come to think of it, if it was published as non-fiction it would probably be illegal.

Marcus is a 17-year-old high school student in San Francisco. He's bright, hip and very computer-literate, if not exactly the most diligent of pupils. He's regularly in trouble with the school authorities, and he and a group of friends often bunk off during part of the school day on computer-led treasure hunt games. They are on one such treasure hunt when a terrorist bomb goes off under the Bay Bridge. In the wrong place at the wrong time, they are rounded up by the Department of Homeland Security and subject to several days of intense questioning. Marcus, naturally anti-authoritarian, comes in for particular attention before the DHS finally decides to release them. Except that one of the four, Darryl, who had been injured just before their arrest, is not released with the others. Marcus decides he has to get Darryl back, and that determination slowly turns into a war of attrition against the DHS.

Because the world they are released into is not the same as the one they had known before. The DHS has used the excuse of the terrorist attack to place San Francisco

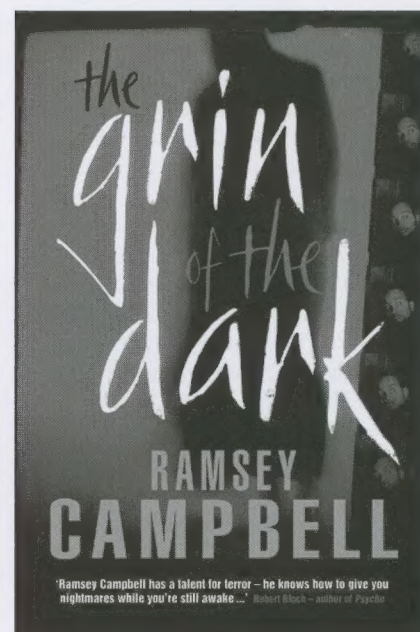
under a repressive and restrictive regime. Marcus finds himself having to counter the technological wizardry of the authorities with his own geek skills. Thus we get an object lesson in how everything from credit card use to subway tickets can be used to keep tabs on people, counterpointed with lessons on how such technology can be subverted and how gait-recognition software can be fooled. As in all wars, there is escalation. So we see Marcus setting up a network that can't be penetrated using the Xbox, then how the authorities can keep tabs on this by watching for unusually high traffic, then how Marcus can find ways to hide the traffic, then how the authorities can use spies, and so on.

Purely as a novel, there are many things wrong with *Little Brother*. For a start the action is continually being stopped to provide long infodumps on everything from the way computer networks are set up to the history of the hippies in San

The DHS has used the excuse of the terrorist attack to place San Francisco under a repressive and restrictive regime

Francisco. (*Little Brother* is a Young Adult novel, but there is no sense of Doctorow softening the blow or hedging around certain issues for his intended audience, and indeed a number of the explanations that interrupt the flow of the novel, such as details about how certain games work, seem aimed more at those of us from an older generation.) But since the story is as much in the information as in the action, the reader never feels irked by these interruptions, and indeed they often add mysteriously to the breathless pace of the book.

As an overt criticism of the War on Terror policies of the current US administration (at one point Marcus is subjected to waterboarding), and as a guide to how we can resist the Big Brother instincts of an authoritarian government, this isn't just one of the best novels of the year, it's also probably one of the most important. **Paul Kincaid**



THE GRIN OF THE DARK

Ramsey Campbell

Virgin Books, 404pp, £7.99 pb

Simon Lester is a young film historian and journalist who has been reduced to working in a petrol station shop following the failure of *Cineassed* magazine. Simon's recent past catches up with him when his former university tutor appears and offers him a lucrative contract for a book on his special interest: the career of the all-but forgotten stage and silent film comedian Thackeray Lane (aka Tubby Thackeray). Thackeray's slapstick stage performances and films proved too controversial for his own good, accompanied as they often were by disorder and unexplained deaths. His last films went unreleased and became unknown to all but a few die-hard aficionados.

Simon is portrayed as a decent and ordinary man beginning to put together a new life and enjoy it with his partner Natalie and her young son Mark. Simon experiences all of the insecurities of someone trying to do the right thing by his new family, and even Natalie's somewhat hostile parents and his own very strange ones. But misunderstandings always occur, aided by the characters relating through Campbell's typically stilted and unsettling dialogue. As Simon delves deeper into Thackeray's life, it is his own life that starts to be increasingly transformed. His world is really as precarious as any Lovecraft character's. Behind the flickering scenes there is who knows what.

Although the product of an old technology is being explored, plenty of new technology is used throughout, which helps sustain the all pervasive sense of obsession and lurking nightmare. The internet has seldom seemed so useful and so dangerous. Websites, newsgroups, message boards and mobiles help to increase the sense of vulnerability and impending chaos that constantly threatens Simon – and Mark, his enthusiastic helper. Mark's involvement adds a further dimension of exposure: a child who has taken on the adult's interest and shares in his obsession, but doesn't have the adult's few and weak defences.

Thackeray's slow invasion, all indistinct and shadowy, with his contaminating trademark grin, the crumbling language of his intertitles and dumb-show lip movements, and lethal clowning, creep into all aspects of Simon's life. Eventually there is no safe place from the corrupting

It is good to see Ramsey Campbell once again receiving mass-market publication with one of his finest novels

obsession. The flickering atmosphere of old silent black and white films, their stylised cityscapes, crooked buildings and streets, blurry shapes and mouthed silent language, becomes all-pervasive, as a resurrected invocation seems to allow the masque and mask to become the world.

It is good to see Ramsey Campbell once again receiving mass-market publication in his own country with what is one of his finest novels. In *The Grin of the Dark* Campbell revisits the old film territory of *Ancient Images* (1989). But he deals with the material much better than before. Campbell's inventiveness creates a mixture that questions and distorts reality, making everything a search for hints of an appalling truth. It draws everyone and everything in. There seems to be no comfort and peace at the end of this novel of human and unhuman artistic transactions and transformations. The show goes on. **John Howard**



INCANDESCENCE

Greg Egan

Gollancz, 272pp, £12.99 pb

Greg Egan has a deserved reputation for hard SF. Bits of your cortex may have slight breakdowns while journeying through his novels. How best to read *Incandescence*, then? There is a prequel and I'm going to send you there first. 'Riding the Crocodile' can be found on Egan's website (gregegan.net). I'll wait.

In the far future our descendents are part of a galaxy-spanning civilisation called the Amalgam. The singularity, if such a thing happened, was in the distant past, along with the discovery of fire and suchlike. People are, effectively, immortal. Their personalities travel between the stars as packets of information that can be downloaded into bespoke bodies or virtual landscapes, and back-ups can be made in case of mishap. The biggest problem is ennui. There are around 300,000 years separating the short story and the novel, but not much has changed.

The last big mystery concerns the galactic core, which contains a civilisation called the Aloof who have rebuffed all attempts to communicate with them. That they do exist and are not merely some ghost construct is the gist of the short story. They remain, however, inscrutable until a traveller who has passed through the core as information reveals that there is a mysterious DNA sample on a meteor inside the core. Two travellers from the Amalgam, Rakesh and Parantham, are

invited into the core to find the origin of the DNA sample. Their story alternates, chapter by chapter, with the adventures of the beings in the Splinter. And it is the Splinter that makes the brain hurt.

This thread follows beings who live inside an asteroid in a neutron star's accretion disc (the titular *Incandescence*). Gravity gets weird here, and trying to get one's head around the Splinter is not easy, even with diagrams, thank you very much. Most of us will have to trust the author. However, it becomes apparent that Roi and her fellow beings are not entirely sure what is happening either. They are, in fact, the characters who are most like us: ignorant mortals trying to intuit the nature of the universe from the shadows on the walls (although there's not much in the way of shadow in the high energy environment of the Splinter). The centre of the Milky Way is a wild place, and Roi and her whole civilisation soon discover that they are in mortal danger.

But we'll return, for a moment, to trust. Trust seems to be the overriding theme of the novel. The Amalgam exists through trust – when you launch yourself through space as a packet of information, you have to trust that people at the other end will download you. Rakesh and Parantham have to trust that the Aloof are benign, and there is always the possibility that they are not. And Roi and her friends have to trust that their new mathematics is not going to accidentally destroy their world in the attempt to save it.

Incandescence occasionally stumbles with characterisation. The Splinter inhabitants, for all of their carefully worked out biology and society, sometimes suffer from anthropomorphism. Egan may write about one of them pressing himself against the rock in mock stress, but in our mind we see a Disney creature pretending to clutch its head in anguish. It's a minor flaw. However, it's drowned out by the sheer exuberance of invention. *Incandescence* will never be a big crossover hit, but that's hardly the fault of the book. Those who do find it will love it. The way Egan writes it, the Amalgam feels like the only possible future, and the future looks just fine from here. **Jim Steel**

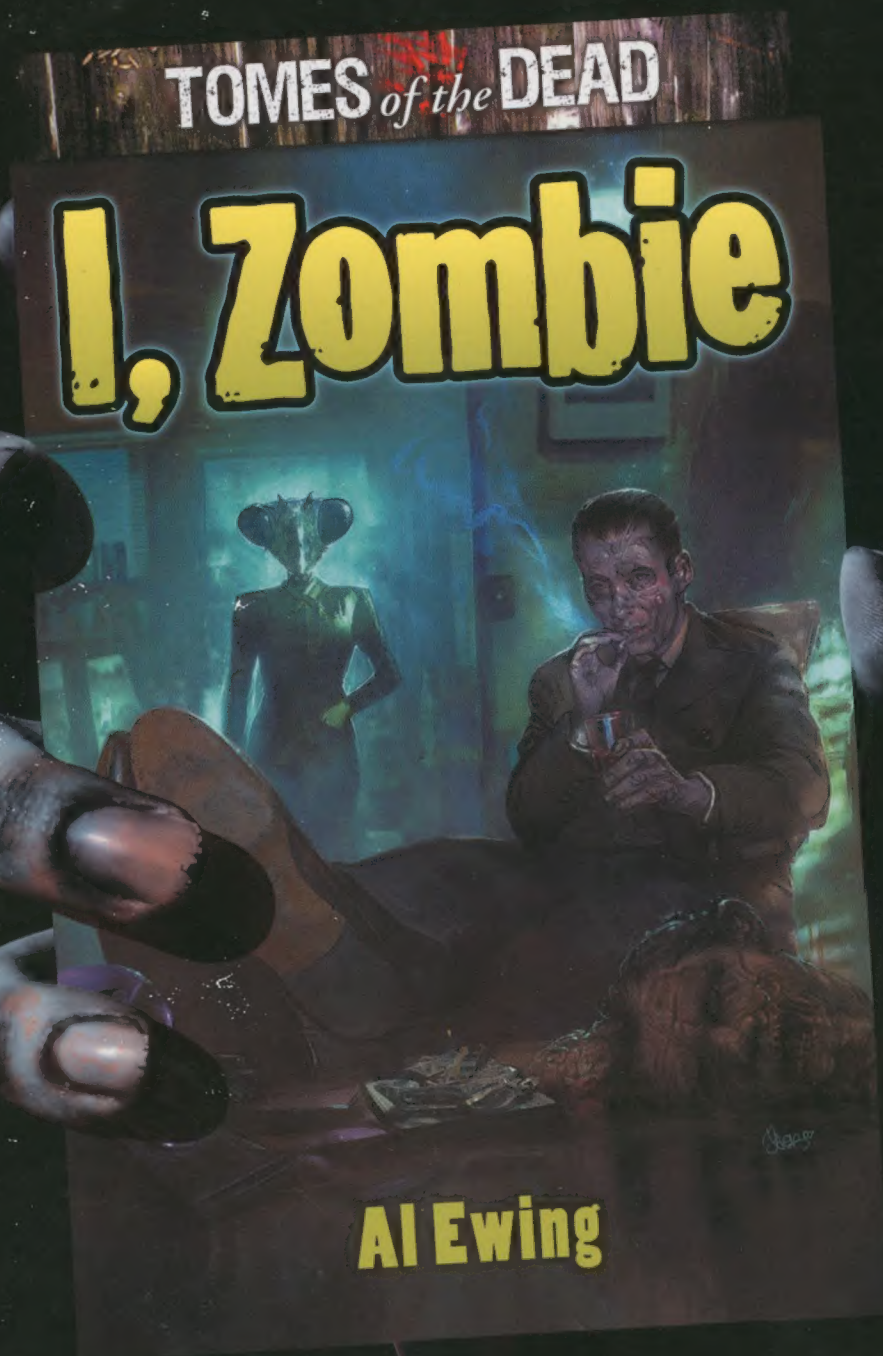
SPECIAL OFFER: You may order copies of the *Incandescence* paperback for the special price of £6.99 by calling 01903 828503 and quoting reference number MA03. UK postage and packing is free, overseas add £1.60

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